



# THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

A COMMUNION OF CHURCHES – EINE KIRCHENGEMEINSCHAFT – UNA COMUNIÓN DE IGLESIAS – UNE COMMUNION D'ÉGLISES  
LUTHERISCHER WELTBUND – FEDERACIÓN LUTERANA MUNDIAL – FÉDÉRATION LUTHÉRIENNE MONDIALE

Department for Theology and Studies –Office of the Director

## BEYOND TOLERATION

### TOWARD DEEPER RELATIONSHIPS WITH MUSLIMS

#### A consultation message to churches of the Lutheran communion (LWF)

December 2006

#### Introduction

*The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) Department for Theology and Studies (DTS) held a theological consultation December 1-3, 2006, in collaboration with the North Elbian Center for World Mission and World Service (NMZ, Hamburg) at Christian-Jensen-Kolleg in Breklum, Germany. The purpose was to assess the present situation after some decades of LWF work in the area of Christian-Muslim relations, and to focus on responding theologically to the new challenges member churches face. The following message draws on the papers, discussions, and, on the last day, deliberations of the consultation participants.*

*Strategically, this event was held in northern Europe near the end of a year during which various incidents have evoked new tensions and questions. Most of the participants came from this region: Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Latvia, and Slovakia. They shared many models and examples of how Christian-Muslim relations are being pursued, especially in the North Elbian Evangelical Lutheran Church. Participants also came from and brought somewhat different perspectives from Brazil, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Tanzania and the United States. By coincidence, this consultation met at the end of a week in which Pope Benedict XVI made an historical visit to Turkey, and the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) released a major new theological statement on Christian-Muslim relations.*

*This was the second in a series of theological seminars related to the LWF program, "Theology in the Life of the Church." A discussion of this message and of differing perspectives will take place on the Web site for this program: [www.luthersem.edu/lwfdiscuss](http://www.luthersem.edu/lwfdiscuss) (under track 2).*

#### Assessing the current situation

- (1) There is great variety in the contexts and character of Christian-Muslim relations in the world today. Disturbing images and dynamics are present in many societies. However, it is problematic to generalize because of the different histories, asymmetrical numbers and power of Christians and Muslims, and the pivotal cultural, political and economic realities affecting these relations.
- (2) In some European countries where Christians are in the overwhelming majority, Muslims have been present for many years. Nonetheless, they are still not integrated, and experience considerable discrimination. In some historically Lutheran countries, such as Denmark, the identities of the nation and the church have been so intertwined if not merged that probing questions and tensions have arisen due to the increasingly visible presence of Muslims today. This has also inspired new initiatives for dialogue.
- (3) In Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world, minority Christians and majority Muslims have coexisted for centuries, despite some tensions. In India, Christians and Muslims share a common minority status over against the dominant Hindu religious



influence. In Palestine, there have been long-standing good relations between Christians and Muslims. In African countries, the relative proportion of Christians and Muslims varies greatly, with continuing rivalries and tensions in many places. It is often difficult to ascertain who is in the majority. In some African and Middle Eastern countries, small Christian minorities feel threatened by state-supported Islam and the growing influence and radicalization of Islamic-associated movements.

- (4) **We affirm and raise up the long established relationships between Muslims and Christians living together as good neighbors, even as members of the same families, and of working together for the common good in everyday tasks, especially in times of need and disaster.** Such committed Christian-Muslim relations, and the ongoing dialogue that is a natural part of such living, are an important witness and learning for those for whom interfaith encounters may feel new and strange. This has also led to the emergence of expressions and adaptations of Islam that are not monolithic, but marked, for example, by their African, European, North American or Asian contexts.
- (5) For some decades now, important dialogue initiatives have been undertaken by the LWF and the member churches, as well as within the ecumenical movement. Innovative models and significant insights have come from this work. Locally organized dialogues are increasingly taking place between Christians and Muslims. But these pioneering initiatives have yet to become a broad, participatory movement that reaches and affects large proportions of our churches and communities, who still have few ongoing interactions in which they really get to know actual persons who are Muslim. **On the basis of our experiences, we strongly believe all Christians and Muslims need and can benefit from such shared personal encounters.**
- (6) People are highly susceptible to generalizations and polarizing stereotypes fueled by the mass media. This has escalated in such places as the USA, for example, where the number of people holding negative images of Islam has doubled in the past four years. Christians in many countries increasingly say or imply that “the Muslims” are the source of many of the problems they face. In recent years in Germany, the designations, images, and related emotions have evolved from “guest workers” to “foreigners” to “Turks” to “the Muslims” to “the Islamists.”
- (7) Longstanding images of the “other,” which largely are creations of people’s imagination, play powerful roles. For example, European identity has long been based, in part, on deeply rooted images of an “other” against which European identity and Enlightenment traditions developed, while a more strident Muslim identity is reinforced by what is alleged to be the Christian West’s crusading mentality. **There is an urgent need and responsibility for churches to counteract and speak up against the negative stereotypes and misuses of religion, and to contribute to the emergence of national identities that are truly inclusive, rather than relying on negative images of an “other.”**
- (8) The tendency to use religious symbols and motivations covertly as well as openly for ideological and political purposes has dramatically increased since 2001, whether by militant extremists without state power or by nation states who misuse their power. The misuse of religious faiths and their symbols by social, economic, political, and media powers exploits and distorts the dynamics of conflicts. Radicalism and revivalism are fueled by **both** Muslim and Christian self-appointed spokespersons who use fundamentalist, exclusivist language. The continuing conflict in the Middle East and the “war on terrorism” throughout the world are not only violating human rights and international law, but also adversely affecting Christian-Muslim relations in many settings throughout the world.

- (9) Passive, disinterested coexistence alongside each other will not suffice, without actual encounter and authentic solidarity in joint struggles for the common good. Superficial forms of toleration do not result in social integration and the overcoming of discrimination, which isolates and often radicalizes. Instead, we need to encounter one another as persons and to engage in serious discussion over our differences. Many Muslims indicate they want genuine respect and are open to engaging with those of other faiths.

## Responding theologically

- (10) What motivates us as Christians to move beyond mere toleration to meaningful engagement with others is the heart of the gospel narratives: Jesus was continually crossing boundaries and entering into dialogue with others. He began not with abstract doctrines or statements, but by engaging with actual human beings.
- (11) The gospel calls us to know, engage with and serve our neighbors. Mission means that we are sent by God to our neighbors. This sending should encourage us to meet our Muslim neighbors in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect, and without hidden agendas. Such meetings are opportunities for both Christians and Muslims to share their honest witnesses with each other, to speak of what they share in common, as well as where they differ.
- (12) Such an orientation can help communities counter the tendency to turn inward to solve their identity and security needs and encourage them instead to embrace dynamic rather than static identities and faith understandings. We discover the multiple facets of and shape our identities through such interfaith experiences: we can no longer see ourselves simply as Christian and Muslim “blocks.” We experience the diversities within each religious group.
- (13) As we do so, we discover that we all in some sense are “strangers” on our different journeys with God, open to God’s ever-new surprises. Such designations as “insiders” (those who belong) and “outsiders” (newcomers) are transformed. Rather than some being the hosts and others the guests, mutual hospitality is involved. Although these personal encounters may begin on many levels, as people of faith, we must be open to engaging with actual questions of faith.
- (14) These encounters and engagements motivate church members to ask deeper questions regarding the content and meaning of the Christian faith than they might have otherwise. In that sense, this is a wake-up call. The experience of dialogue does not compromise, but can deepen our own faith understandings. The reality is that many Muslims may be clearer about who they are and what their faith teaches than are Christians.
- (15) Thus, the increasing presence and witness of Muslims in our midst is exposing a serious void: many Christians lack a basic understanding of their own faith and religious traditions, how to interpret Scripture and how to reflect theologically on realities they face today. **There is an urgent need for continuing to educate Christians about the Christian faith--basic catechesis--and its meaning in their lives, as well as the need for basic education about what Muslims believe.** The experience of minority churches living in majority Muslim situations and churches forming within Muslim contexts may be helpful in this regard. However, it is crucial that this faith formation itself be dynamic and dialogical, rather than by imposing static, formulaic answers.
- (16) What then are theological avenues for Lutheran Christians to pursue as they relate to other faiths? One promising possibility is living more deeply from out of the triune understanding of God. Far from being a *skandalon*, for Christians this is the

transcendental condition for interreligious dialogue, permitting us to take the other in all seriousness, without fear or violence. It provides a flexible, relational model that opens up the possibility of a dialectical plurality in unity, open to the other, yet without losing its own strong sense of identity, anchored in Jesus Christ. The Trinity implies that there must be principles of transparency, companionship, and equality in our relations with one another and others. This provides a basis for dealing theologically with increasing religious plurality.

- (17) The Spirit of the Triune God sustains Christian practices that move us beyond fear and open us up to the future. We dialogue in the hope that we will reach fuller understandings. We extend mutual hospitality, open to what new surprises may await us. We seek forgiveness that can move us beyond the impasses of the past to reconciliation and peace.

### **Addressing past, present, and future challenges**

- (18) There is a critical need to deal with **the past**, and honestly face what was said and done and how this may affect Christian-Muslim relations today, including past and continuing actions of nation states. Where might forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing of memories be necessary? Although the Lutheran tradition is fundamentally open to religious freedom and the existence of other religious faiths, negative rhetoric Luther used against the Turks and as reflected in some Confessional writings must be revisited and reassessed. So too must the history of mission activity and of colonialism in Muslim contexts.

- (19) Muslim-Christian dialogues are affected by Jewish-Christian relations and cannot be disassociated from them theologically. Yet, they are distinct, demand their own approaches, and should be pursued in ways that do not jeopardize Jewish-Christian dialogues.

- (20) As we face the challenges of living together as Christians and Muslims **in the present** and **for the future**, agendas for theological dialogue must be set mutually, in conversation with Muslims. From our perspective and experience as Christians, we suggest that potential themes might include,

- How do we each understand revelation and the will of God?
- How do Scripture and the Word of God “live” in our respective traditions?
- What do prayer and spirituality mean in our traditions?
- How do we understand God’s justice? Does it consist of legal codes to be implemented, or is it an ideal to be sought yet never fully codified?
- What are the key practices of hospitality in each of our traditions?
- How can we come together to further basic ethical values in society in the face of increasingly secularized and material values?
- If both traditions understand God to be the creator of the universe, from this common ground, how might we work together on ecological and environmental challenges?
- In the face of poverty, natural disasters, disease and human conflict, how can we work together (*diapraxis*), drawing upon the commitment to justice and peace in both of our faith traditions?

(21) In a mature dialogue, difficult questions must also be discussed, such as how can we understand and address human rights (especially of women) and freedom of religion, especially as this relates to majorities and minorities today. How do we each relate faith and culture? How do we each understand the law as it relates to society?

(22) Both traditions have important religious concepts regarding the future of humankind and the earth in general. More extreme apocalyptic worldviews are prominent in some segments of Islam as well as in some segments of Christianity, and often are used against each other. Responding to these and other attempts to predict the future and to reduce the freedom and creativity of God could be a common theme for discussion.

## **Recommendations to the LWF and member churches**

- a) A theological review process should be undertaken to assess the ambivalent historical heritage of Lutheranism with regard to Muslims, to clarify what is historically conditioned and what still needs to be overcome, and resulting in a theological declaration to be officially acted on by at least the LWF.
- b) Further systematic theological work is needed, drawing especially from global Lutheran perspectives, on how Christian faith and practice relate to other faiths.
- c) Joint formation programs for future leaders and multipliers of Christian-Muslim dialogues, and curricular resources to prepare leaders for interfaith relations should be developed.
- d) Mutually agreed upon codes of conduct should be developed for interfaith relationships and practices (such as marriages and funerals) in local contexts.
- e) Church-related and secular news should provide more coverage of positive and promising examples of Christian-Muslim cooperation.
- f) Intentional efforts should be made to close the gap between official church statements and exchange of greetings by religious leaders, and the assumptions, realities and practices in local settings.
- g) Churches should reciprocate the “open mosque” hospitality practice of Muslims by designating specific days when Muslims and those of other faiths would be raised up in prayer and intentionally welcomed to visit “open churches.”

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