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Lutheran Theology across Global Contexts

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Introduction

It is my pleasure to be able to welcome all of you to what is probably the largest, and certainly the most diverse gathering of theologians that the Lutheran World Federation has ever held – one that for some time we have been envisioning as the culmination of the Theology in the Life of the Church program (hereafter, “TLC”) that was initiated nearly five years ago, but an event that in many ways, builds upon important developments that have been underway for some decades.

This promises to be a pivotal historical event in the life of the LWF, and we are glad that all of you made the efforts and sacrifices to join us here in Augsburg. Augsburg has been critically important in the early history of the Lutheranism in the past, which is why it seems strategic to be here to focus, not so much on the past, as on the future of theology in the life of Lutheran churches.

In this opening presentation, I want to do four things:

- 1) I will provide some sense of how this consultation builds upon theological shifts that have been occurring in theology and within the global Lutheran Communion (i.e., the LWF) over the past thirty or so years, and on the other hand, how what we are about here is distinctive from or moves beyond what has occurred thus far;
- 2) I will point to some of the insights, surprises and learnings that have come from the TLC program thus far, and which have informed the foci and composition of this consultation;
- 3) I will identify some of the assumptions, rationale and expectations for what will be a complex array of foci and interactions over the next week, and
- 4) I will set forth some hopes for the outcomes and possible impact of this gathering.

1. Building upon yet distinctive from what has already occurred

Probably the most obvious shift over the past forty years of theological work in the LWF is in terms of who would be gathering for such an event. Not surprisingly, forty years ago a gathering like this would have been almost totally European and North American men, from well-established academic settings, with an occasional woman from those areas, and even more rarely, a male theologian (no female!) from Africa, Asia or Latin America. Thirty some years ago, when I first participated in an LWF theological consultation, as one of the only women, distinctive theological perspectives of women or from anyone from beyond the North Atlantic were considered novel, marginal, exotic, but hardly to be taken seriously in mainstream biblical, systematic or practical theological work. Fortunately, by 25 years ago that had begun to change, such that when I began teaching at a seminary in the U.S., the first theology course students were required to take was explicitly from African, Hispanic, Asian and feminist perspectives. But it would be illusory to assume that such perspectives would quickly impact, much less transform, the heart of what was considered normative Lutheran theological understandings and practices throughout the world.

In 1956, the LWF convened the first International Congress for Luther Research, where Bishop Hanns Lilje of Hanover, then president of the LWF, emphasized that Luther’s theology is a theology of the “living word,” thus implying the need to contextualize it in much different kinds of realities. However, it was not until the 1970s that this challenge was taken up in a major, sustained way through the significant, often controversial ecclesiology study of the LWF, “The Identity of the Church and Its Service to the Whole Human Being.” This study made important methodological turns by beginning with the contexts of churches in different parts of the world, and drawing upon the social sciences in this theological work. This was followed in 1984 by LWF theological work to engage multifaith realities, staffed first by Paul Rajashekar, who will also address us here.

A decade ago, a study program on “Communion, Community and Society” was carried out, whose results are found in the book *Between Vision and Reality: Lutheran Churches in Transition*. A team of theologians from the seven regions of the LWF held consultations in the regions to discern how the churches there understood and lived out their calling in their respective societies – which involved observing, critiquing and pursuing theological work across contexts. At the concluding meeting, here in Europe, the churches themselves left the impression that in many cases what was most deeply influencing them was not necessarily the renowned theology which many tend to associate with Europe, but instead, factors such as their relation to the state, to ethnicity and to the market. It was asked, “When the church is mostly a reflection of the wider society, or the handmaiden of the state in carrying out certain services, what happens to its distinctive identity and mission in society?”² How might theological understandings be far more determinative of what it means to be the church in the future?

At the beginning of this decade, this is how we described the theological work of the LWF: Theology reflects on the God we know in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. It draws upon theological formulas and doctrines of the past, but more is involved than simply repeating them. Good theology is characterized by a spirit of meditation, reflection, and inquiry, rather than only by the answers it might provide.

Theology is continually asking, “What does this mean -- today?” The value of theology is in terms of the questions it raises, and the new space it opens up for confessing and living out the faith in current contexts. It ought to be a critical accompaniment to all that the church says and does, thereby provoking the ongoing reformation of the church, its structures and practices. Theology should challenge churches to consider new questions and horizons of faithfulness today, in light of the biblical and confessional heritage we share.

Theology is necessarily contextual. Universal theological categories that presume to speak with the same meaning to all people are appropriately viewed with suspicion, especially when they become only platitudes. But we also must move beyond repeatedly stating the differences, or posturing that sets those in some parts of the world against those in other parts. The challenge is actually to do theology in the midst of the Communion. The probing then leads to a communication of theological insights so that what we as churches confess can speak in more persuasive ways to the particular and urgent yearnings, pathologies, and crises of our day. Thus, theology asks questions such as: How might resurrected hope be embodied and enacted amid the

¹ *From Federation to Communion: The History of the Lutheran World Federation*, ed. Jens Holger Schjorring, et al (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997), p. 187.

² Karen Bloomquist, “Who Defines the Church? The State, Ethnicity, or the Market?” in Wolfgang Greive, *Between Vision and Reality: Lutheran Churches in Transition* (Geneva: LWF Documentation, 2001), p. 363.

emptiness, pathos, and suffering in our world – for the sake of the healing of the world? How does God’s liberating, reconciling work become incarnate in the many contexts in which Lutheran churches today seek to live out the Christian faith? How is what we confess reflected in how we worship, preach, teach, pray, live together as communities of faith, and respond to the challenges we face in our world today?

Some of us here were also present at an important conference on the future of Lutheran theology, convened in 2003 at Aarhus University in Denmark, bringing together a number of Lutheran theologians, largely from Nordic and US settings, as well as a few from other parts of the world, in order to consider the state of Lutheran theology in the beginning of the 21st century. As Niels Henrik Gregersen noted in the introduction to the book published on the basis of that conference, “The identity of a Lutheran theology should not be found in a system of ‘Lutheran theology,’ but in a commitment to develop theologies in attentiveness to first-order Christian practices of divine-human communication.”³ We are reminded that Luther himself was a practical theologian – concerned with grounding theological reflection in liturgical, pastoral and catechetical practices, in how God’s word of promise can be heard contextually.

Important theological emphases were explored at this and other gatherings of Lutheran theologians that *do* have relevance for the development of Lutheran theology in different global contexts. However, we need to ask, how much are these really helpful in responding to the actual issues, challenges and practices of the Lutheran churches that are growing outside Europe or North America? Were *their* concerns really at the forefront of the theological discourse and constructions? Were they active participants or only passive recipients of theological responses worked out by others, in relation to realities that at most, only vaguely resemble theirs?

2) Shifts reflected in the composition and agenda of this consultation

It is important that such discussions include not only global South theologians who have been educated in the North, who tend to be the most known or visible, but also those who are immersed in the daily realities of ordinary people, such as local pastors and church leaders, whether in the global North or South, East or West. At times, this also includes theological insights from those without formal theological training, such as a lay person who asked to participate in our first TLC seminar in 2006 in Arusha, and actually had some of the sharpest insights. The voices from such settings need to be heard in our theological conversations here, at least through the pastors and others who are in touch with such local expressions.

Notice that in most of the above theological conversations, it was the presence and influence of systematic theologians or Luther scholars who were predominant. But gathered here are not only those who have specialized in systematic theology or studies of Luther but also biblical scholars, and those with emphases in other fields, such as worship, education, missiology, pastoral care, ethics, and church and society. Why such a motley group? Aren’t we more accustomed to meeting and conversing with those in our own discipline and its approaches? We are such a mixed group, first, because you are the people who responded to the invitation to participate.

Also, by intention this event includes a significant focus on the Bible, because how the Bible is read and interpreted has become a matter where serious differences and tensions often emerge among Christians, especially with regard to certain ethical questions. DTS recently had a

³ Niels Henrik Gregersen, “Introduction,” *The Gift of Grace: The Future of Lutheran Theology*, ed. Gregerson, et al (Mpls.: Fortress, 2005), p. 1.

study program focused on biblical authority and interpretation,⁴ but there still is significant work to be done, especially in transforming understandings in local settings, where literalist if not fundamentalist approaches too often hold sway.

The theology that most church members hear and experience, what nurtures and shapes them, is not what is taught in academic classrooms but what is concentrated in worship and other practices that reach not only the mind but also what we hear, see and feel through words, song, touch, and our interactions with each other -- which is why early on in the TLC program we realized that how central these practices are in communicating the faith, and why they themselves call for serious theological reflection.

Focusing on “Theology in the Life of Lutheran Churches” *necessitates* interdisciplinary perspectives and approaches. This is because if theology is to make a critical difference in the life of Lutheran churches around the world this needs to occur through more than only those who are recognized systematic theologians or Luther scholars. If one scans the global scene outside of Europe and North America, there aren’t that many in these particular disciplines (as traditionally demarcated) who come to mind, at least among the younger generation. Instead many have specialized in areas such as biblical studies, pastoral care or missiology, and are teaching in settings where future leaders of Lutheran churches are being educated, increasingly in ecumenical if not interfaith environments. Also important, of course, is doing theological work in conversation with other disciplines. In-depth work in only one discipline remains a luxury in settings where those who teach are called to do so across an array of disciplinary boundaries.

And yet, in such settings, questions increasingly arise as to what it means to be Lutheran. Does being Lutheran really even matter any more in increasingly ecumenical settings? Or for churches that for long have had a united Lutheran and Reformed identity? Much higher priority is given instead to what will connect with the realities of people today and the challenges churches face in their witness in the world. But even if that is the focus or point of departure, the question still remains as to how Lutheran perspectives might relate or be renegotiated in light of these realities. This is important, not to bolster up a narrow Lutheran identity but to bring Lutheran insights into ecumenical and civil society engagements. Such a “Lutheran identity” cannot be based only on coded Lutheran formulas, or historical legacies brought by missions, or on the basis of ethnic or tribal identities, or historical accidents. Instead, sifting through, reconceiving, and “transfiguring” (V. Westhelle) Lutheran theology is a dynamic movement in which the grace and promise of God is communicated through words, symbols and actions that look, sound and feel much different from those in 16th century Germany, or 20th century America.

Thus, here at this consultation, and in the Theology in the Life of Lutheran Churches program as a whole, the methodological point of departure is not necessarily with what historically have been the recognized Lutheran categories. I predict they will come up here often, but in relation to the manifold challenges that face us in various contexts globally today.

From the beginning of the TLC program, the attempt has been to focus on key challenges that Lutheran churches face, especially in those areas of the world where Lutheran churches are growing the most and/or are in the kinds of contexts that are vastly different from where recognized Lutheran theology has developed in the past. Thus, based on a survey of church leaders and theologians in 2004, the four initial tracks of TLC were focused on what it

⁴ Witnessing to God’s Faithfulness: Issues of Biblical Authority, Reinhard Böttcher, ed. (Geneva: LWF Studies, 2006).

means to confess and live out faith in the Triune God in the face of 1) death and injustice, 2) interfaith realities, 3) Pentecostal and charismatic influences, and 4) moral differences that threaten church unity.

In the TLC program it is important to note that the focus has not been on the challenges themselves – the study has not focused on the injustices, fundamentalism, Pentecostalism or interfaith realities per se -- but on the call to pursue critical, constructive theological work in relation to these realities. This is the distinctive methodology through which this program has attempted to address the gap between theology and the life of the church – by carrying out constructive theological reflection that is responsive to the challenges Lutheran churches are facing. Somewhat unexpectedly, worship and other practices (such as communal lament) emerged as points of departure for theological reflection.

Those most affected by the challenges need to name and assess them – rather than others doing so on their behalf. Yet for critical constructive theological work, collaboration with and learning from one another *across* contexts is strategic, especially in a globalized world that is permeated with all kinds of “hybridity.” Although the distinctions of “global South” in distinction from “global North” are often used, as we are well aware matters are far more mixed than this: much of the North is in the South, and increasingly much of the South is in the North. Although most of the past seminars in this program have focused on challenges especially urgent in a given context, perspectives of those from outside that context have also been particularly provocative and helpful. It is too limiting to do theology only in relation to the context we know best.

All theology is contextual, including 16th century Lutheran formulations that often have been assumed to be global and timeless. “Academic” vs. “contextual theology is a false juxtaposition. Yet still today, theological work that readily claims to be contextual often still is passed over, not treated that seriously by those who claim to be the definers and defenders of the Lutheran theological tradition, and do so in highly elaborated academic discourses or with confessionalist rigidities.

It is impressive to realize how much contextual theological work actually is being done in theological institutions around the world – often critiquing and sometimes also reconstructing what has been received from others. But at a Lutheran seminary in Africa, where a number of theses have been written on contextual matters, one faculty member commented to me that graduates often are reluctant carry this forth or implement these understandings and practices into their ministries, because of the resistance they feel they will face. Beginning with local contexts is crucial, but it is also crucial that theological work not end there.

A few years ago, in speaking to doctoral students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Pietermaritzberg, South Africa, I challenged those doing contextual theological work to be bolder in bringing that work into arenas outside their own particular contexts. Unless this intentionally cross-contextual theological work occurs to a greater extent – interrogating and reconfiguring inherited theological positions with a rigor and persuasiveness that moves across cultural boundaries -- unless that occurs, then presumably universal theological understandings will continue to claim an authoritative hold, even if they no longer are what liberate people, that is, no longer are gospel for them.

Here “gospel” is not a fixed, unchanging formula of truth, but, as Douglas John Hall puts it, “news” expressed in a way that we have not quite heard before and that is addressed to our situation in such a way that it becomes “*good* news.” It speaks to what is occurring in a given

context and alters what was oppressive and predictable, bringing in a sense of surprise, wonder and gratitude, rather than being something predictable, formulaic or rote.

3. Some assumptions and expectations

What are the possibilities for genuinely cross-cultural Lutheran theology? Theological work must take seriously the different contexts and the challenges they pose as points of departure for theological work that relates meaningfully to what it means to be the church amid today’s realities -- in ways that connect, critique, reconfigure and transform. This is not only a methodological matter but it goes the core of what theology is, and the need for consistency between what is said and how it is pursued.

For the most part, there has not been a rich vein of published theological work grounded in global South or East contexts that can be drawn upon to respond to these challenges, other than what has been brought, influenced by or imposed from the outside. Often this is quite dated, and no longer reflective of theological perspectives being pursued in theological institutions in the North or West. At last year’s TLC seminar in Hong Kong, the challenging question was asked of participants: “Why are you mostly referring to writings of dead Euro-American men, rather than the lively, creative theological work being done in recent years by theologians who are female and/or African, Asian or Latin American?” Sadly, that work is more visible in academic conferences in the North (such as the American Academic of Religion) than it is in the vary contexts where this work is based and to which is presumably is accountable. At the same time, the richness of what is being published, such as through the Concerned Circle of African Women Theologians, is hardly known in many parts of Africa, much less the rest of the theological world. I hope some of the writings from this event, and from work that will be stimulated by it, can help address this gap.

There is an acute need to nurture and develop theologians who really are in touch with the actual realities of their contexts, and who do not just repeat theological answers they have been taught by others, but who are able to think critically, creatively and constructively about theological questions. That means giving attention not just to what is taught, but how it is taught (pedagogy), or as we will give some attention to here, “integrative theological formation.” Ten years ago in Rome, the LWF held a consultation of theological educators that made a series of recommendations in this area, some of which have been implemented in theological institutions, and I hope further impetus might come from this event.

Much academic theological work still tends to be carried out in ways that seem disconnected from the practical, everyday questions and realities facing the churches, so that even for many church leaders, theology as pursued in academic settings seems irrelevant, not very meaningful, much less transformative. For example, basic life and death questions such as “blessing” and the “afterlife” that came up at the Hong Kong seminar, or pondering whether God’s anger is what is being expressed through disruptive climate changes⁵ --- such questions that arise in basic survival situations, which is where Lutheran churches actually are growing the fastest – may be quite different from those arising in affluent, secularized settings, the kinds of contexts presupposed in much high-level Lutheran theological discourse. Again, this does not mean that the latter kind of theological work is no longer needed – its critical perspectives are important -- but it must become accessible to and engaged with the kinds of questions people in other parts of the world are raising.

⁵ See “God, Creation and Climate Change: a resource for reflection and discussion,” by Karen L. Bloomquist with Rolita Machila (Geneva: LWF, 2009).

There must be more mutual interaction between different theological points of departure – to get at the appropriate questions before moving on to the possible answers. It is not that one side has the questions, and the other the ready-made answers, but there needs to be joint inquiry as to whether a given theological “key” actually does unlock what is holding people captive today.⁶

Certainly much in-depth attention to theology is occurring, but this tends *not* be in those places in the world, or in the Lutheran communion, where churches are growing – there’s little time or opportunity to do so there. Instead, sophisticated theological work often is occurring where Lutheran churches long have been shapers of the dominant culture and institutions – and where churches are increasingly stagnant rather than dynamic and zealous in their ministries and mission. We must ask, how helpful can theological work be as carried out in long-respected university or seminary settings of the North, for churches that are struggling with challenges and questions that for the most part were not a part of 20th century theological discourse, and may still be mostly in the margins of 21st century theological agendas?

These different perspectives and priorities must not remain separated from each other; instead, it is urgent for these different discourses and realities to engage in genuinely mutual ways and to communicate with each other *across* contextual differences, and thus to work together in reconfiguring Lutheran theology for the future. This is the urgent matter we will be about at this consultation. It needs to occur across all the usual divides of theological schools or approaches, of regional, ethnic and gender differences, of contrasting social, economic and political realities.

4. Some concluding hopes

Earlier this month, my colleague Elaine Neuenfeldt shared a homily at the chapel of the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva, based on the familiar dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Elaine pointed out that such dialogues are always transforming. They cannot be based on one being the giver and the other the receiver. Instead, what is needed are participatory approaches that involve mutual transformation.

That is also an underlying presupposition of this consultation. How might each of us be transformed through our interactions here? If we are honest, we have to admit that theological pursuits often reflect a competitiveness and self-interestedness (how can I advance or distinguish myself?) that may claim to be but often does not serve the life of the church. Instead, how might what are we about here contribute to the transformation of the future of theology in a Lutheran and ecumenical spirit? And how might this, in turn, witness to God’s transformation of a world that today lives in great fear of what the future holds?

How will we theologically engage today’s manifold global crisis of economic, political, environmental but also deeply spiritual dimensions? Yes, with pastoral concern and diaconal response; yes, in preaching that reiterates where our trust and hope lies, but also in clearly naming what has gone wrong, in raising up values and reweaving the social fabric, institutions and regulations that can restore a new sense of solidarity for the sake of the common good, especially for those rendered most vulnerable.

⁶ See Vitor Westhelle, “Transfiguring Lutheranism: Being Lutheran in New Contexts,” in *Identity, Survival, Witness: Reconfiguring Theological Agendas*, vol. 3 in *Theology in the Life of the Church* series (LWF and LUP, 2008), p. 23.

What does it mean to confess and live out the faith in the midst of the disturbing times in which we live? How might perspectives and resources of the faith we confess carry us through, open our eyes to new ways of addressing our realities, of what really matters, and transform us and what we say and do, in and on behalf of God’s one world? I hope light might also be shed on these crucial, timely matters during our days together.