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This is the eighth in an occasional pamphlet series of theological reflections on timely challenges facing churches of the Lutheran communion. It is produced by the LWF Department for Theology and Studies, but does not represent official positions of the Lutheran World Federation. You are encouraged to duplicate, translate and use this in local settings. To subscribe to this series, please contact Ursula Liesch at Liesch@lutheranworld.org

A CAULDRON OF DEATH ... AND HOPE?

EPIPHANY REFLECTIONS

“The idea of a multicultural society cannot succeed. It is doomed to failure from the start.”¹ This shocking statement from the leader of Germany’s main opposition party—who also insisted that immigrants must adapt to Germany’s Christian-oriented culture—reflects a growing sentiment in many parts of Europe. Tragically, a similar attitude also prevails in many other parts of the world, especially in those communities where ethnic-religious tensions are simmering and sometimes breaking out into open conflict.

Although some may consider multiculturalism as a threat or a nuisance, it is at the heart of the meaning and witness of Epiphany, as symbolized in the Star that while focused on the manger in Bethlehem radiated out from there to the whole world. This illumines the essentially hybrid nature of Christian identity: Christian distinctiveness is defined not by a boundary but occurs at the boundaries between cultures. The relations with what is “outside” (foreign, alien) is the crucial determinant in Christian identity itself.² “Our identity, therefore, is not a matter of fueling the inertial drive of the past (tradition), but an event that permanently flows from breaching the boundaries met by the church.”³

Cultures are an aspect of God’s good creation but their bounds can also be misused to dominate or exclude others. What is particularly disturbing is how Christians often try to justify or defend a “Christian” culture or identity in the face of what are perceived to be the threats of other cultures or religions. This has occurred repeatedly throughout the history of the church. Tragically, “Christian identity” has come to be associated with some of the most racist ideologies and movements in North American and Europe. Making a case for some distinctive Christian beliefs or practices vis à vis other religions can be necessary and appropriate. Nonetheless, when this

becomes a defensive bulwark in opposition to other cultures (and the religious worldviews embedded in them), this goes against the heart of the Christian gospel, as embodied in Jesus.

In his life and teaching, Jesus was continually reaching out—across cultural and religious boundaries—to those whom others avoided, rejected or despised because of their different cultural and religious identities (such as Samaritans). Thus, it is not surprising that Christ is depicted as bringing together those separated from each other: “in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us” (Eph 2:14).

From its beginning, the church has been a boundary-crossing movement, bringing together those of many different cultures, as exemplified in the first Pentecost (Acts 2). In doing so, the church witnesses to the power of God, for whom diversity is not a curse but the supreme expression of God’s creativity; all human beings are created in God’s image (Gen 1:27). God in Christ reconciles all creation, and empowers us through the Spirit to communicate across all that would divide us. Thus, it is because of our confession of faith in the Triune God that we cannot tolerate intolerance toward those who may differ from “us.”

Sadly, throughout history churches have fallen short of this. To a large extent, Lutheran churches, for example, have been organized around cultural identities related to ethnicity, and in their missionary activity have carried the same pattern to other places. Many local churches still tend to be more segregated than the changing societies around them. What kind of a witness is this to those who are “outside”? When churches become cultural fortresses standing defensively against others, they betray the faith they confess. While this became starkly evident under racist conditions of South African apartheid, in relation to which the LWF took a strong confessional stand in 1977, it continues to occur in more subtle yet insidious, sinful ways in our own day.

Because of central faith convictions, churches must speak out and challenge all forms of discrimination, xenophobia, racism and ethnocentrism. It is not only prejudice against others that reflects sin, but how this becomes embodied in institutions, policies and practices that favor the more powerful dominant culture, ethnic group, race or caste. It is crucial that pastors and other church leaders be trained and expected to confront and change these attitudes, practices and institutional realities in both church and society.

How is your church identified with certain ethnic or cultural groups in your society? How is this seen or experienced by others? How is this being addressed?

At Christmas we celebrated God's incarnation in the birth of the Child at a particular time and place. Jesus was born of a particular family lineage (Mt 1). The cast of characters, including the animals and the rest of creation, are familiar, distinctive features of this nativity story. The story is deeply contextual, and borrows from other traditions. In its retelling in other times and places, it has acquired details that further contextualize it, in chilly Northern as well as balmy Southern contexts.

But the intimacy of Christmas broadens immediately into the universal reach of Epiphany. A tension quickly emerges between contextualization and catholicity, between the intimacy of a family birth and the outreach to strangers and outsiders—a move from Bethlehem to the whole world. The church's witness must become "incarnate"—real, embodied, believable—in particular cultures and times, but it is always more than that. Too often, rather than living faithfully and creatively in that tension—where God is active—the church retreats into frozen or rigid boundaries that need to be challenged because of how they betray the catholicity of the church. Catholicity "implies not only to be present at the many boundaries, but also to discern which ones need to be crossed, which ones need to be dismantled, and which ones simply need to be named and made visible."⁴

HOPE IN THE MIDST OF DEATH

The Star has long been associated with the transition from Christmas to the boundary-crossing implications of Epiphany. But on the second day of Christmas in 2004, in a time of heightened cultural and religious tension throughout much of the world, rather than a Star, a different kind of natural phenomenon shook up the whole world. In a region of the world filled with diverse cultures and religions, a tremendous parting of the earth stirred up massive, devastating walls of water, bringing sudden hell to places previously associated with paradise.

As people of many cultures and religions, young and old, poor and rich from all over the world were swept up in this watery cauldron and tomb, a global lament of grief erupted. In the face of such widespread, gruesome death—in almost apocalyptic terms—the differences of culture, religion, wealth and nationality were no longer the distinctions that mattered. All were swirled together in the tremendously destructive force of water.

Nevertheless, amid this widespread cauldron of death, a yet more powerful force erupted: the overwhelming sense of human community, solidarity and compassion that breaks down all our human-created "dividing walls." Questions about the meaning of this tragedy and how God is involved in all of this will continue to haunt many. But the ways in which diverse people are being stirred up, brought together across all that usually divides

them, and responding to this tragedy, attests to how God continues to act: transforming death into life, despair into hope, and empowering us in communities of compassionate action. Often this is hidden, but in kairotic times such as these, we experience anew this profound truth that is at the heart of the triune faith we as Christians profess.

Can people be brought together amid all their multicultural (and other) differences? Does it take tragedy for this to occur? Although it is in such times that we fleetingly glimpse these possibilities, the challenge is in sustaining and living out this vision of human community over the long-haul. May God encourage and empower us to do so.

How have you been affected by this tragedy? How are you responding to this theologically, as well as through your actions? How do crises such as this test or deepen what it means to be a global communion of churches? Please share your responses with us and others in the communion! (kbl@lutheranworld.org)

NOTES

¹ Angela Merkel quoted in the International Herald Tribune, 9 December, 2004.

² Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), pp. 115ff.

³Guillermo Hansen, "On Boundaries and Bridges: Lutheran *Communio* and Catholicity" in Wolfgang Greive (ed.) *Between Vision and Reality: Lutheran Churches in Transition. LWF Documentation 47* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2001), p. 405.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 388.

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