

This is the twenty-sixth 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

DARE WE STAY TOGETHER AS A COMMUNION?

As the members of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) move toward the 2010 Assembly, simmering tensions over such matters as marriage, family and sexuality, are testing whether we really believe in and are willing to live out the deeper implications of what it means to be a communion of churches.

The 2003 LWF Assembly declared,

Our mutual participation in Christ leads us to challenge all those cultural, economic and political forces that define and tend to divide us. Thus, communion can make us uncomfortable as assumptions and practices that we take for granted are challenged and we are pushed to consider questions that we would not as separate churches on our own. These tensions, which can at times be threatening, are also a sign of vitality; they can deepen the realization of what it means to be a communion.¹

In other words, being a communion does not depend on whether we actually like one another, or the state of our partner church relationships, or our positions on political, social or moral issues. Although harmony may be preferred over differences and disagreement, being a communion is not synonymous with harmony, much less uniformity. In his letter to the early church at Corinth (1 Cor), St Paul frequently was addressing dynamics such as these. The church is one body, not in spite of but in and through its differences, which can bring tensions, but also are signs of life.

Communion is not based on human feelings or preferences, but on who God is. God is relational—as exemplified in the relationships within the Trinity and how God is related with us and the rest of creation. Who God is is grounded in grace and love, vulnerability and death, understood in light of the resurrection and eschatological hope. Dwelling in this

God, we also are empowered to be in similar kinds of relationship with one another—because of God’s gift of communion with us.

Because of this, we are reminded that ultimately we are held together not by our efforts, our good feelings toward one another, or how moral or upstanding we or others are, but by God’s gracious actions, by justification, and by what God promises to bring to fulfillment. The communion is the sacramental and ecclesial reality that together grounds our identity, how we view one another, and the horizon of our actions as churches.² The agape love that is intrinsic in communion involves reciprocity, claims and counterclaims, needs and responses. It is multilateral, going significantly beyond bilateral relationships of “donors” and “recipients” and toward more complex relationships of mutuality and accountability.

We are formed in communion with God and others, in ways that call for faithful responses in relation to those whose realities are quite different from our own. Even though we all claim that the Bible is authoritative for our faith and life, we may not be able to assume that others share our ways of interpreting Scripture. Yet we are held together by God in Christ through the Holy Spirit in ways that enable us to talk together about our different ways of seeing or interpreting, without this degenerating into shouting matches, power plays, or mere restatements of our own positions. Simplistic condemnations of the positions of the other will not suffice.

This communion today is polycentric, present in many different contexts where questions and challenges vary. The question is whether we as a communion have reached the stage where critical engagement can be ventured, across cultural terrains, because of how God in Christ through the power of Holy Spirit continues forming us into a communion, in the midst of this diversity.

In such situations, any process of discussing ethical issues necessarily requires humility and care, not only to avoid giving unnecessary offense, but because of how we interact with one another, especially across all the disparities that divide us, is itself part of the witness of the interactive body of Christ in the world—its public witness in the world. There may be enormous power disparities, advantages and disadvantages among us, yet we deeply yearn to be connected, as parts of the one body of Christ. The way in which we respond to each other can be as important as is the content of what is said. It is not a matter of one position being imposed on or winning over the other.

Furthermore, it is not our moral clarity that ultimately matters—this is not what makes or breaks the communion. Instead, we live by a Christian faith that is permeated with hope, comfort and confidence, based on who God is and what God promises, and on what love or responsibility toward the neighbor might entail in particular contexts. What is considered to be faithful to God’s mission in one context may not be in another.

Does this mean that those outside our own contextual realities are not to critique such? No, we need the perspectives of others to help us see what we cannot when blinded by our own biases. Criticism must be offered in ways that are open to hearing and discerning how central ethical values are being realized, or violated, through the practices in a given contextual setting. But a rush to judge certain practices or positions as being “unbiblical” or “immoral,” or others as “fundamentalist” or “intolerant” cuts off any further conversation, and thus itself violates the norm of neighbor love toward those who hold an opposing position.

Discernment in a communion involves eyes, ears, mind, heart, bodies, experiences, feelings, and the sharing of stories. It does not mean knowing for sure; that kind of confidence can lead to dangerous hubris. Active discernment necessarily occurs in community with others, which helps to keep us humble. Those who are most different from us can help to transform how we see, feel and evaluate our ethical convictions, and thus enriches us. This is an aspect of what it means to be and to grow together as a communion. In a communion, pausing genuinely to hear the other is more important than prematurely setting forth our own position in ways that cut off further dialogue.

How can we become more open to sharing the painful aspects of our historical memories that continue to fester in the present? For example, some of us might feel, “Your forebears ‘brought’ the gospel to us, along with lots of other cultural assumptions and practices, and at least implied that many of our indigenous beliefs and practices were wrong and needed to be replaced with this foreign garment. Now we hear you proposing different understandings and practices, which we do not agree with.” In reaction, others might be thinking, “But didn’t we teach them ways of interpreting Scripture that should broaden their perspective? They should know better, given what we taught them!” Note the condescending assumptions that still may be present, along with the pressure still simmering from a history of unjust relationships, which occasionally may erupt like a volcano. When this occurs, we need to be open to hearing what might be at the heart of the lament—the past offenses on all sides—even though the sharing of memories, and healing and reconciliation may involve a long and difficult journey.

At the upcoming LWF Eleventh Assembly, we will be asked to name and repent of the horrendous ways in which Lutherans on the basis of confessional documents have persecuted Mennonites (i.e., Anabaptists). But what about the historical patterns of domination and subordination between Lutherans in different parts of the world? Dare we risk acknowledging, confessing and repenting of what has occurred in the past in order to be open, through God’s grace, to reconciliation and a deeper sense of being a communion, not on our terms, or on the basis of conditions set down by the stronger partner, but because our mutual relationships are formed differently through the Triune God?

Dare we risk being thus transformed through our interaction with those different from ourselves? Dare we risk appreciating more deeply what it means to be a communion, not as what we bring about or can control, but as a divine reality that transforms all of us in the process?

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NOTES

"For the Healing of the World," Official Report of the LWF Tenth Assembly, Winnipeg, Canada, 21-31 July 2003 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2004) p. 52,

²"A Call to Participate in Transforming Economic Globalization," in Karen L. Bloomquist (ed.), *Communion, Responsibility, Accountability*, LWF Documentation 50/2004, (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, p. 117.

This is the fourth in a series of recent TIO issues that reflect on matters emerging in LWF discussions on marriage, family and sexuality. For other issues see http://www.lutheranworld.org/What_We_Do/Dts/DTS-Thinking_it_over.html. For the proposed guidelines for discussing this in the LWF and member churches, see http://www.lutheranworld.org/LWF_Documents/2007_Council/Task_Force_Report-EN.pdf

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