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*This is the ninth 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](mailto:Liesch@lutheranworld.org)*

## **A “CHURCH FOR OTHERS” IN THE MIDST OF XENOPHOBIA**

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*“Dietrich Bonhoeffer—a witness among his brothers.” Inscription at the site of his execution*

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On 9 April, many will commemorate Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s violent death in 1945, in Flossenbuerg, one of the Nazi concentration camps in Germany. Bonhoeffer, a pastor of the Lutheran church, was hanged for high treason because of his close involvement in the military resistance against Hitler’s regime.

The vast legacy of his short life—he died at the age of 39—is highly complex. He is one of the few Christian theologians who, all over the world, even outside church circles, are much appreciated and sometimes even venerated.

Even those who know only very little about him know that Bonhoeffer dared to resist tyranny, for which he paid with his life. This leaves many to pause in reverence and awe and raises questions about human dignity, the meaning of life and the witness of the church.

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*What do you know about Bonhoeffer? What is the meaning of his witness for us today?*

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## **ORIENTATION AMIDST CONFUSION**

It is evident that the world has undergone profound changes. While processes of economic globalization open up new possibilities, they also endanger the lives of many. People of different ethnicities and cultures interact with one another much more than ever before. This provides new opportunities but also causes tension and strife and people of different faith traditions are challenged to find ways to live together in peace. At the same time violence, in particular that perpetrated by those in positions of power, seems to be an all-pervading reality threatening the cohesion of communities and people’s lives. These factors combined give rise to confusion and insecurity which, in turn, spark off aggression, hatred and fundamentalist tendencies in many communities.

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*How is your community affected by these realities? And how does your local church respond?*

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Bonhoeffer does not provide a clear-cut solution for these complexities. Having himself lived in times of profound crises, such as the gradual collapse of democracy, the rise of a dictatorial regime and growing secularism, his life, spirituality and theology might provide some elements of orientation for us today.

## **AUTHENTIC AND CREDIBLE WITNESS**

What is fascinating about Bonhoeffer is, first of all, the close correlation between what he said, wrote and did. Evidently he thought very carefully about what to say and which steps to take next. His death was certainly not the direct result of his faith, but it was closely connected with what he believed, preached, taught and wrote. For many this is precisely what made him a credible witness to Christ.

In a world which has developed highly sophisticated techniques to manipulate and distort language in the areas of economy, culture and politics, personal integrity is challenged and put to the test. The church is no exception. People in leadership positions especially can be in danger of manipulating church members. This becomes disastrous for the mission of the church. Communicating the Christian truth calls for an upright and authentic witness.

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*How might you have experienced this in your community or church?*

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## **FAITH AND THEOLOGY IN THE SERVICE OF LIFE**

Bonhoeffer's theology resisted the temptation to adapt to fads or prevailing trends of his time. Rather, he interpreted the gospel in faithfulness to the Bible, in carefully listening to the heritage of the church, in particular to the confession of the Lutheran Reformation. In doing so, he sharpened the witness of his church as well as contributed to protecting the endangered humanity by making common cause with those beyond the church. His concern for the dignity of human life became apparent in his involvement in the resistance movement against Hitler, where Bonhoeffer found himself side by side with labor unionists and socialists who had turned their backs on the church.

## **“CHURCH FOR OTHERS”**

One could say that the pivotal point of reference for Bonhoeffer was always Jesus Christ. He could look at him from different perspectives and take him as the point of departure in various directions. Closely reflecting the apostle Paul and Luther, he perceived Christ as the one in whom God came to our rescue, bore our sin, imparted to us God's righteousness, and liberated us from judgment. Under the pressure of tyranny and war, he emphasized that this “Christ for us” calls us into the fellowship of his church as well as to radical discipleship. The church is only faithful to its Lord if it is “church for others.” Its mission is to preach the gospel and to administer the sacraments. This entails responsibility for the vulnerable and taking a stand for those whose dignity and lives are threatened, especially by the state.

## **THE CHURCH AND THE JEWISH PEOPLE**

A case in point was the fate of the Jewish people. Today, from a post-holocaust perspective, one can say that Bonhoeffer's understanding of the Jews was not adequate (see *LWF Documentation 48*). He still reiterated longstanding stereotypes of Christian anti-Judaism, but vigorously opposed the introduction of the so-called "Aryan clause" into the church, by which baptized Jews were prevented from assuming positions of ministry in the church, in particular the ordained ministry. In September 1933, the Protestant church in Germany introduced this clause in response to pressure from the state and in order not to offend "native" Germans. Baptized Jews serving as pastors, so the argument went, might hinder the church's mission. Bonhoeffer insisted that baptism and faith are the sole criteria for belonging to the church as the Body of Christ. Established requirements for ordination to the pastoral ministry must not be burdened with additional conditions. As a result the Protestant church in Germany split and the "confessing church," which Bonhoeffer passionately supported, emerged.

When a few years later the fascist state exercised increasing pressure on the Jewish people and it became apparent that their very survival was at stake, Bonhoeffer demanded that the "confessing church" speak up not only on behalf of its baptized members of Jewish descent, but on behalf of the entire Jewish population which had become the most vulnerable group in society and the target for systematic extinction. All efforts remained in vain.

In many places resentment and hatred against the Jewish people (as well as against Muslims) are again on the rise. Bonhoeffer's call, "Only he who cries out for the Jews may sing Gregorian chant" has lost none of its relevance. Wherever possible, it is part of the church's mission to protect those whose dignity and lives are under threat.

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*Who in your local setting is especially at risk? How does your church respond to this?*

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## **THE CHURCH AS COMMUNION**

In some places, also within churches, there are tendencies to rally around ethnic identities, thus excluding others belonging to another ethnic group, even though they, too, are baptized members of the church. In this way the church itself becomes a source of fragmentation. Bonhoeffer reminds us that the God of Israel has identified him/herself in Christ as God for all of us, that God extends his/her salvation to all of humankind, and that all who respond to the gospel in baptism and faith are called to participate in God's mission, irrespective of race, ethnicity, cultural identity, gender etc. The church is a communion of diverse people who are bound together by the love of the Triune God.

Thus the church is called to be a witness of inclusion and reconciliation. This does not deny the borderlines between different faith traditions. Rather, it testifies to the truth that God intends humanity to share life, to live together in peace and to recognize the image of God in every human being.

## **ECUMENICAL CROSS-CONNECTIONS**

In 2004 I had the opportunity to listen and speak at a seminar on *diakonia* and citizenship, organized by the Lutheran Church in El Salvador/Central America. While talking about the Lutheran Reformation as a prophetic movement and referring to Dietrich Bonhoeffer as an example I was struck by the fact that everyone had some idea who I was talking about. Participants, across church borderlines, could easily associate Bonhoeffer with Oscar Romero, the former Bishop of El Salvador, who because of his involvement in the struggle for justice, democracy and human rights on the side of the poor was gunned down by a right wing military commando during mass. Many churches and Christians will commemorate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his violent death on 24 March this year. The closeness of these two anniversaries is a reflection of the similarities of these two Christians and their witness. Good Friday and Easter falling between these two dates this year reflects a deep connection between Jesus', Bonhoeffer's and Romero's destinies. In the practice of their faith and lives both responded to Jesus' call into his discipleship and into his witness to God's Kingdom of salvation, of justice and peace. In all three cases this witness provoked violent resistance on the part of those who had a vested interest in upholding a system of oppression.

Most of us are called to live out our faith under far less dramatic conditions. And yet, sometimes, Christian faith may provoke opposition and cause suffering. Easter stands for God's promise that in the end life and dignity will prevail and death and destruction overcome. This promise may give us courage and sustain hope in the midst of confusion and looming despair and help us to move on.

**REINHARD BOETTCHER**

## **FOR FURTHER READING**

Wolfgang Greive and Peter N. Prove (eds), *A Shift in Jewish-Lutheran Relations? LWF Documentation 48* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2003), especially pp. 39-85.

John W. de Gruchy (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Ernst Feil (*The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Phildadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

Geoffrey B. Kelly and C. John Weborg (eds), *Reflections on Bonhoeffer. Essays in Honor of F. Burton Nelson* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1999).

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