

# “Thinking it over...” Issue #10

JULY 2005

*This is the tenth 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)*

## WORSHIP IN AN AFRICAN CONTEXT OF CRISIS

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*In March 2005, Itonde Kakoma, a theological assistant in the LWF/DTS Office for Worship and Congregational Life, convened discussions under the theme “Worship in African Contexts of Holism and Crisis.” The following is an excerpt from the paper developed in light of these discussions. For the complete document contact: [ijb@lutheranworld.org](mailto:ijb@lutheranworld.org)*

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If liturgy is considered to be the authentic expression of the gathered community before God and one another, stagnant liturgies function as forms of “structural violence.” The language of violence with respect to “liturgies” is by no means extreme, for the nature of human beings is far more complex than can be captured in a conventional form designated for “cross-cultural” translation.<sup>1</sup> For a liturgy to be merely translated is for it to be static and thus lacking the living tongue and experience of the gathered community.<sup>2</sup>

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*Are these critiques applicable to the worship life in your community?*

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UN Secretary General, H. E. Kofi Annan, stated that, “the United Nations is ... the indispensable common house of the entire human family.”<sup>3</sup> So too, the church claims to be “the indispensable common house of the entire human family.” More specifically, the church confesses to be the redemptive house for the entire human family—where neither ethnicity, tribe, gender, class, nor clan are causes or catalysts for division. (Cf. 1 Cor 12-13; Eph 4:1-6; Eph 2:11-22). “... out of abundant love, God looks with compassion on our separation from God, one another and our own best selves and sees our deep need for reconciliation, reunion and renewal. God in Christ heals these divisions and grants us communion with the Holy Trinity and with one another in the sacrament of baptism.”<sup>4</sup>

The church is called to unity; more precisely, the church is called to be a testament to unity, in sharp contrast to a world of divisive norms, mores, beliefs, histories and actions.

## THE CASE OF RWANDA

The Rwandan tragedy reveals the fragility of the human family and that of the church. Acknowledging such failure, H. E. Paul Kagame stated that “...the world had the means and the resources to act but lacked the will to do so, despite the solemn refrain, ‘never again’ after the holocaust.”<sup>5</sup>

The church, called to be a light upon a hill for the whole world to see, continually covers its flame with shadows of complacency and hypocrisy. Where were the cries and confessions of Christ's redemptive sacrifice when thousands of Rwandans sought refuge in sanctuaries, only to perish at the hands of parishioners, nuns, monks and clergy?<sup>6</sup>

Prophetically, Bishop George Wilson Kalissa of the Lutheran Church in Rwanda (LCR) writes that, "the moral authority of the church has been undermined by the readiness of churches to make accommodations with the powers that be, irrespective of the principles of accommodation... [t]here is a consensus that the church must be reborn."<sup>7</sup>

Bishop Kalissa is to be commended for his candid remarks and proposal for an ecumenical rebirth. In continuity, Rev. John Rutsindintwarane, general secretary of the LCR, extends this vision into the actual life of the church; he asks whether or not such a vision can be integrated into the church's liturgies.

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*Can the shape, substance, practice and space of worship reflect the often tragic realities of the gathered community?*

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While the LCR faces many difficulties, it brings a strong vision of ecclesial integrity to the Rwandan context. As a newer church, the LCR desires socio-political relevance. Post-genocide development is crucial. Unlike most church bodies in Rwanda, the LCR was not present during the genocide or a culprit of its atrocities. Thus it has a unique opportunity to be a healing agent within society. Rutsindintwarane sees this as a testing phase or a temporary period for measuring the relevance and integrity of the LCR.

With roots in Tanzania, the LCR's very nature is cross-cultural. Its connection to Tanzania is part and parcel of its nature. A great challenge lies in how it becomes the Church of Rwanda and not simply a "diasporic" church of Tanzania. The people of Rwanda have been scattered for many years, assuming other cultures and customs. The celebration of such history, as opposed to its dismissal, may be a more truthful witness to the complexities of Rwandan society.<sup>8</sup>

## **GACACA AND THE SOCIETAL IMPLICATIONS OF CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS**

Immersion into Holy Scripture reveals a God who desires a repentant people. With the continual use of forgiveness, the New Testament clearly attests to this. Repentance is the turning away from one's self and the entrance into communal life with all its imperfections.

The pre-colonial *gacaca* (literally "grass courts"), Rwanda's traditional court system, is geared toward reintegration as opposed to incarceration or capital punishment. It is currently a means by which society is trying to engage in the work of reconciliation—the antithesis of cruelty, enabling one to live as intended, i.e., in healthy relationship with one another.

The "Christian" notions of confession and forgiveness constitute the foundation of the *gacaca*: the gathered community pledges to receive the confession of the wrongdoer; in confessing before the community the confessor is forgiven and once again received as a member of his/her community.

The Christian practice of confession and forgiveness is rooted in penance. The notion of penance as a practice or a set of practices obscures its relation to the Greek term *metanoia*, a state or process of continual repentance. *Metanoia* is a way of life, not simply ascetic practices enhancing or refining one's life. It is the Christian way of life and not merely reserved for the castigated. Taking this into account, the Christian life might best be understood as a perpetual process of conversion.

While most reformers denounced penance as sacrament, Martin Luther desired to retain it as such; his emphasis, however, was in the absolution.<sup>9</sup> In the absolution, God's redeeming Word is proclaimed and thus manifested. Note that it is God's Word and not the priest's or the acts of the penitent that are emphasized. God's Word of forgiveness is an irreducible sign of grace. One does not strive to be forgiven; forgiveness is the reality in which the Christian resides. Penance is not a means of obtaining forgiveness but a means through which one perpetually strives to bask in and bare witness to God's forgiveness. Although the notion of penance as *metanoia* is recaptured in Luther's claims, it is seriously challenged in the context of Rwanda.

These two forms of confession and forgiveness, namely *metanoia* and *gacaca*, are related in at least three ways—honesty, reception and reintegration.

Both forms require the accused's honest and willing testimony. Furthermore, the communal reception is essential to the process. It is not enough to confess solely to a judge; the community must hear and receive the confession. Reintegration is the most challenging: in the case of the *gacaca* the local community is held accountable to assist the confessor in reestablishing/reintegrating him/herself into society. Similarly, in the church's practice of confession and forgiveness, the gathered community is called to be accountable to one another beyond the sanctuary.

The great difference between the church's practice of forgiveness and the secular process of *gacaca* is that the church's practice can easily be, and is typically, left to abstraction. In this sense, language—as powerful as it may be—bears no real consequence, while with the *gacaca* process real life matters are—intimately and necessarily—involved.<sup>10</sup>

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*How then can the church's language and practice maintain the truth of God's unconditional forgiveness and the quest for justice?*

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Theoretically, the LCR is held bound to acknowledge the criminal acts of the genocide and could be prosecuted for any language that minimizes or dismisses such.<sup>11</sup> That is to say, if we take God's absolving Word as truth, is the crime of the confessor minimized or dismissed? More clearly, does the Christian practice fall into minimization or dismissive language of real life crimes?

So too, the *gacaca* process is regarded with much suspicion.<sup>12</sup> The same concerns raised about liturgical language and practice are raised by many survivors of the genocide. Although the *gacaca* process may have real life explications, it is also vulnerable to reducing the language of confession, forgiveness and reintegration to abstraction.

Sound liturgical practice could contribute to reconciling this broken society. *Metanoia* allows for the remembrance of sins; never will nor should such atrocities be forgotten—*metanoia* is a continual process of reconciliation.

The LCR is challenged to be a healing agent in society. It has the opportunity to share a rich heritage of liturgical practice in a context where ecclesial institutions have been the source of much division. It will take much creative attention, flexibility, and a willingness to adapt the timelessness of the church's mission to the timely concerns of Rwandan society.

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*How does worship relate to the timeliness of crisis and still maintain its timeless confession?*

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Serious concerns were raised at Nairobi ("Worship in African Contexts of African Contexts of Holism and Crisis," March 2005) by a gathering of African pastors, theologians and lay leaders, representing nine member churches of the LWF, about the legitimacy of the Nairobi Statement (Worship & Culture, LWF 1996). Those present were not convinced that contemporary African voices have been or are significant players in determining the catholicity of certain liturgies.

<sup>2</sup> This has been and continues to be debatable. Thus, the LWF Commission on Liturgy writes in its 1952-1957 Report that "The Commission... was aware that it could not be one of its tasks to work out a 'unified liturgy' or 'unified order of service' for all the member churches of the LWF... for it would be a violation of *Confessio Augustana VII*, were on to maintain that 'unity of faith and confession' could be effected or guaranteed by a unified liturgy," p. 8 of para. IV.

<sup>3</sup> As stated in his address on 21 September 2004 to the UN General Assembly.

<sup>4</sup> *Community in Christ*. Department for Theology and Studies Office for Worship & Congregational Life. (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2003), p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> As stated in his address on 18 April 2004 at the Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars.

<sup>6</sup> "The Kigali Covenant," in *A New Vision for Africa* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005), p. 89-91.

<sup>7</sup> In the Strategic Plan for 2003-2007 of the Lutheran Church of Rwanda.

<sup>8</sup> Having stated the above, is it problematic that the LCR's current orders for worship are a direct translation of the Kiswahili from the liturgy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania? Ponder this in light of the fact that the Kiswahili is a translation from the German. When such translations occur, how seriously considered is the actual experience of a particular people gathered for worship?

<sup>9</sup> Frank Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic & Evangelical* (Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 230.

<sup>10</sup> Rutsindintwarane comments on the necessity of the confessor's "inner-transformation" for either process to have real life consequences.

<sup>11</sup> See *The Constitution of the Republic of Rwanda* Title II "Fundamental Human Rights and the Rights and Duties of the Citizen," Articles 11-13.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Karasira conveys the complexity of the *gacaca* system in "*Gacaca: Justice for all or Injustice for Some?*" Documentation Department, *Gacaca* Jurisdiction: <http://www.inkiko-gacaca.gov.rw/En/GacacaJustice.htm>.

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