

LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN DESK

INTRODUCTION

The Latin America and the Caribbean Desk serves the 16 member churches in the region with the overall mandate of the Department: to support churches as they endeavor to participate in God's mission and to enhance their expression of being churches in communion. Through close contact with the leadership of the churches, the desk seeks to provide accompaniment and to establish cooperation and interaction within the region. Through support of project initiatives, the desk provides the means for the churches to take up their own challenges and to address emerging needs such as HIV and AIDS. Through programmatic work, the desk provides input for reflection and action of the churches.

HIGHLIGHTS OF PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

The principle of co-responsibility: a major breakthrough in the advocacy on illegitimate debt

During 2006 the Norwegian government made the decision to cancel the debt of five countries, explaining Norway's co-responsibility in their lending. The background for this decision is the "imposition" of credits to some countries so that they could buy ships from the Norwegian shipping industry that was, at that time, undergoing severe financial problems. Credits were therefore not primarily addressing the needs of these five countries, but the need of the shipping industry in Norway. For the first time in history, a creditor country acknowledged the principle of co-responsibility and cancelled the debt. The fact that this cancellation was not credited to the budget for Development Aid, as it is usually done, nor discussed with the Paris Club, who normally negotiates debt relief, adds additional relevance to this decision.



*Latin American church Leaders handing over a letter to the Norwegian Ambassador on the debt cancellation
Photo/Grötsch/LWF*

This breakthrough was preceded by relentless advocacy work, particularly from Norwegian organizations and activists such as Changemakers and NCA. The Latin American program "Advocacy on Illegitimate Debt" has been working closely with those groups and has provided important grassroots input to the work in Norway. In a letter to the Norwegian Prime Minister, the Moderator of the Bishops and Presidents of the Latin American LWF member churches, Rev. Dr. Gloria Rojas, thanked the

government for this step and called for further steps in order to establish international auditing systems for more transparent international lending.

In line with this effort, the program plans for 2007 a follow-up of dialogues with European partners on the basis of the principle of co-responsibility. What are the implications of such a principle for the systems in place, within which the lending at international level takes place? What would be the structures for holding both lenders and borrowers accountable? What would be the mechanisms to eradicate blatant impunity in the international lending business?

At a local level, the program has achieved remarkable outreach in civil society. Program staff is at the point of having to refuse invitations from universities, unions and churches because of limited capacity to offer workshops on the concept of illegitimate debt. The convening of a Round Table of high ranking jurists in Argentina to analyze scenarios for legal approaches to illegitimate debt at an international level is an example of the important profile of the program.

“With hope in the future”

An action plan for finding sustainable models of being church in Latin America

The Regional Leadership Conference of LWF member churches in Latin America agreed to appoint a special group that would lead a three-year regional plan addressing the question of sustainability of the churches. The group was given a series of elements and insights to be considered in the process of developing an action plan for the region. After intense work and dialogue, including the member churches, an action plan called “With hope in the future – defining horizons for the sustainable projection of Lutheran churches in Latin America” was set up. The plan stands on two main pillars, which are strongly interrelated: theological (missiological) reflection and participatory planning processes. It aims at creating pilot projects of reflection and planning at the local level, which are nurtured, sustained and monitored by the regional program (steering group with Area Secretary). Through this approach, the establishment of local reference points at the level of each participating member church is envisioned, and the cross-fertilization with regional experiences and models is enhanced. The action plan will have to find a sound balance between giving



Youth in the church and contextual music are marks of a sustainable church Photo/J.Schep/LWF

needed attention to the broad spectrum of elements that configure sustainability (spirituality, theology, structures, finances, human resources), but be specific enough to trigger processes of transformation within the churches towards the enhancement of sustainable models.

This program will constitute the main programmatic focus of the Area Secretary for Latin America and the Caribbean, with subsequent allocation of time, travel, reading and accompaniment during the period of implementation of this program.

“After breaking the silence, we need to overcome isolation”

Involvement of churches in the fight of the HIV pandemic.

The LWF global action plan, “Compassion, Conversion and Care” has set many processes in motion within the region. This momentum was significantly facilitated by the appointment of a Regional Coordinator on HIV for the Latin American member churches. The member churches determined this appointment themselves.



Cover of the book of Latin American churches on HIV and AIDS Photo: R.Krüger

Over the past years, the churches have intensified their engagement in fighting the pandemic. They have initiated project work aimed at awareness-raising and the training within the church, but also in providing concrete accompaniment to people living with HIV and AIDS. Through this involvement, the churches have realized the pandemic imposes actions on their side, which will vary depending on the needs and context. In addition, churches have increased their advocacy role, participating actively in governmental gatherings at sub-regional and regional levels. The main topic of the advocacy work focuses on the ecumenical program, “Keep the promises”, with a specific emphasis on access to medication.

An important achievement during 2006 was the publication of the book “That you may live – the Latin American Lutheran communion listens and responds to HIV and AIDS”, which found high acceptance at a local level. Currently, the book is being translated into Portuguese for a massive distribution within the constituency of the Brazilian LWF member church (IECLB).

Despite the important progress and achievements, however, a concern remains regarding the difficulty for the churches to respond to the pandemic in a more coordinated approach with other actors. These difficulties have many factors, both internal and external. The regional coordination will focus more strongly on the interconnection between churches, local governments, UN-bodies, and the GFATM (Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Malaria and Tuberculosis). It is hoped that through this action, churches will not only be considered (and join) local platforms and strategies, but also connect to local funding schemes.

Setting a multilateral context for bilateral relationships – DMD’s coordination role

The process of accompaniment with the LWF member churches in El Salvador and Honduras, in their endeavor to become institutionally strengthened, continued in 2006. In the case of El Salvador (ILS), the process went into the phase of implementation of its consolidated institutional project. This represents an important step in the institutional process of the ILS. However, the church is quite aware of steps still to be done, so that the envisioned transformation is reached and can be sustained. Two Round Tables (Mutirão) were held during 2006 (April and September), in order to assess the process in dialogue with the church. In the latter meeting, the church and partners agreed to bring the Mutirão process into a new stage, during which it will be widened to include bilateral relationships at the level of congregations. In addition, it was agreed that the leadership of the process should be increasingly transferred from LWF/DMD to the church, according to the shared understanding that DMD took on a very specific role of convening the Round Table process and launching it. The prolonging of this role would undermine ownership and leadership of the ILS, and thus the sustainability of the process as a whole.

In Honduras (ICLH), the role of DMD has been different, since the member church in Costa Rica agreed to take responsibility regarding accompaniment in the process of institutional strengthening, which is certainly an ideal model. Since the beginning of the process, the ICLH has undergone an impressive process of transformation. The main question, however, is about sustaining this process, and the transformation.

The intensive engagement of the desk in this multilateral process, which works very well with the programmatic focus on sustainability, has once again shown that bilateral relationships should not be regarded as a problem or hindrance in the ecumenical movement. They would be, if they were not embedded in a multilateral context, where questions of power relationships, accountability and coordination can be addressed openly. In the specific example of the multilateral processes in Honduras and El Salvador, it has become evident that such a multilateral setting for bilateral relationships doesn’t inhibit these relationships, but extracts their full potential.

LWF’s engagement in Colombia – integrating approaches

During 2006, considerable time and energy was spent in discussion with the member church in Colombia (IELCO) regarding the implications of launching a DWS program in that country. For some years, the DWS Central America Office had assisted the church in

its response to the drama of internal displacement. Discussions with the church showed the need to define, in a more precise way, the distinctive contribution of DWS. DWS is not a church or a department of the church, yet it is an expression of the diakonal concern the global LWF communion. There was also a need to define the design of an integrated DMD/DWS approach to deal with questions of launching and phasing-out programs. The lessons learned in Colombia have enriched internal discussions and will find their way into further consultation processes.



Over 2 million people are displaced in Colombia Photo/D.Perez/LWF

Communication in the region – the need for a more consistent approach

Over the past years, the question of communication has been on the agenda of the Leadership Conference of Latin American member churches. There is a concern regarding the ability of churches to communicate and to raise their communication profile. There is also a discussion about the adequate regional instruments that would address these concerns.

During 2007, the churches will define some elements to reach a more consistent approach in order to respond to the needs. A communion that doesn't satisfactorily communicate is a fundamental contradiction that needs to be addressed for the sake of the strengthening of communion.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In a time of important changes within the ecumenical movement (reconfiguration) and of a renewal process within the LWF, the Desk for Latin America and the Caribbean is prepared to continue ensuring that churches in the region do not disconnect from these wider processes. Churches have to be informed about these processes, and have to find their natural places to connect to them. Although this is a small region within the LWF, the churches still need to discern where to contribute relevantly with their gifts of experience, vision and reflection. The increased momentum that the regional work has acquired over the years, as well as the growing awareness of being churches in communion, provides an important asset in this respect.



Rev. Martin Junge
Secretary for Latin America and the Caribbean

