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A communiqué on Lutheran ecclesiology today

Formed to Embody and Live out what it Means to be the Church

Convened by the LWF Department for Theology and Studies and the Ecumenical Institute of the Evangelical Theological Faculty of Westfälische Wilhelms-University, we, eighteen theologians from around the world, met 4–7 June 2010, in Münster, Germany, sharing insights and deliberating on what it means for Lutherans to realize and live out the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

Our perspectives reflected and drew extensively on our contexts in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin and North America. The following summarizes some important aspects of what we affirm. More on these and other aspects are developed in the papers that will be revised for publication.

1. As Lutheran churches we give expression to the *oneness* of the Church, especially in how we as a communion of churches explicitly state and embody theological understandings of the faith we confess, as indicated most fundamentally in Article 7 of the Augsburg Confession: the church is the assembly of believers where the gospel is rightly preached and the sacraments celebrated in accordance with the gospel. For Lutherans, the Church's unity is not based primarily on how it is organized or how its ministry or liturgies are ordered.

This unity is realized among Lutheran churches as well as through the unity we seek with other churches. This emerges as the many individual churches communicate the Christian faith, reflect theologically and strive for common understandings and manifestations of that faith. Thus, it is a unity in reconciled diversity that finds expression through ongoing processes of reformation.

The diversity constitutive of this unity is not threatening because we believe the Church is one. Yet, that unity continually needs to be made more visible: through networks of communication, responsibility and accountability, including through praying for and with one another. The Holy Spirit calls, gathers and empowers us to face challenges to this unity, in a spirit of humility and compassion.

The criterion of justification also requires the criterion of Christian love. Love, which is at the core of being a communion, builds up and challenges us to accept those who live out the faith differently. With regard to tensions over ethical positions or over who can serve in the ordained ministry, it is not the differences themselves and the challenges they pose that threaten the core of this unity. The only reason for breaking the unity would be if one of the positions were contrary to love, for example, if it were to marginalize or oppress a given group in the church or in society.



2. The Church's *holiness*, which results from the work of the Holy Spirit, is the Church's peculiar distinctiveness in the world. In the first instance, holiness flows from God's forgiveness that comes from the Triune God. Forgiveness of sin is then at the center of the life of the church. However, holiness does not mean being separated from or superior to others; instead, it is connected with the wholeness and healing necessary because of sin and brokenness.

The gift of justification frees us for holy living in community. Churches reflect this holiness by being places and agents of reconciliation, forgiveness and healing. Thus, Lutherans strongly emphasize diakonia as a central expression of the Church's holiness.

If a church is to be *believed* as holy, it must be *believable* as holy and live out holiness in word and deed. Its identity is at the same time hidden and visible. A church clearly indicates holiness through a life of accountability before God and the neighbor.

Because of the work of the Holy Spirit—in gathering, building up and sending the people of God—the Church is intrinsically charismatic. Charismatic movements among us need not be threatening, although they may pose ongoing challenges for us in particular contexts. We maintain that it is crucial that any charismatic gifts serve the other and uphold the whole body of Christ.

3. The Church's *catholicity* not only refers to its geographical universality, but to its universal identity, given through Jesus Christ, and realized through worship in the name of the Triune God. Jesus Christ's universal presence in his Church is spatial, temporal and contextual. The catholicity of the Church is realized locally through a congregation's worship. Therefore, the Church's universality is manifest in the different ways in which churches throughout the world express this in various forms of worship.

When we worship and live out the gospel in our daily lives, we are reminded of the Church's catholicity. Through worship, the Triune God's creating, redeeming, liberating and reconciling work in all of life is communicated and celebrated, and people are brought into communion with one another. This catholicity is realized when a sense of the universal church is present, prayed for and reflected in local worship life.

4. The Church's *apostolicity* refers to the early activities of the apostles in transmitting the faith, and to the Church's missionary being as carried forth by the whole people of God. The Church is called to continue the task of the apostles, who were sent into the world to bring the gospel to all.

In order for this gospel to transform what is happening today under globalization, this needs to occur through a variety of ways and forms—through what can be seen, touched, experienced as well as heard. God's compassion is at the heart of this, rooted in the passion of Christ, and expressed through justice, mercy, judgment and grace. Churches realize this apostolicity by continuing the mission of Jesus Christ: bringing hope to a hopeless world and seeking justice, compassion, liberation and healing for all who suffer.

We encourage ongoing theological reflection on how Lutheran churches throughout the world understand and, through transformative action in church and society, live out what we profess as the very being of the Church: One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic.