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“A Community of Love”

Address to the Council of the Lutheran World Federation By Bishop Dr. Munib A. Younan

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**“I pray ... that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith,
as you are being rooted and grounded in love.”**

(Ephesians 3.17)

Dear sisters and brothers,

I bring greetings to you from Jerusalem, the city where God’s love has been demonstrated to the world in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Today, I will be speaking about love. Grounded in the love of God in Christ Jesus, we are commanded to love one another. It is my hope that our global communion would be, first and foremost, a community of love. This is not a simple idea, because love is neither simple nor easy.

I am quite happy that this meeting is in Germany, hosted by the German National Committee. Thanks for all of the preparation and the trouble you have endured to make this meeting happen. It is especially good to be back in Wittenberg. During my last visit here, we planted a tree in the Luther Garden. During that occasion, the mayor called me an ambassador of Wittenberg. Since then, I have been happy to carry the message of love and Reformation—the message of the freshness of the Gospel—that emerged from Wittenberg in the 1500s and has spread to the ends of the earth.

Germany is a country of profound history, with profound lessons to teach the contemporary world. I would like to highlight three such lessons.

First, when the Cold War ended and the Berlin wall was brought down, West Germany embraced East Germany, creating an entirely new state. At the time, some feared that the experiment would not succeed. They argued that there were two cultures and two systems, but the German people decided that they were one nation under one German flag. We can see today that the German policy of the 1990s was right: Germany was not weakened. Together, eastern and western Germans share a strong economy and a strong bond of identity. The world can learn a great deal about how mutual embrace

leads to mutual success and how we can all have political orders which embrace diversity.

Second, we should celebrate how Germany emerged from the second world war. In the decades since that time, German churches and society have rejected anti-Semitism and developed relationships with Jews near and far. Many German churches have taken vanguard decisions that have shaped our global Christian witness. Today, the many Muslim neighbors fleeing their home countries and coming to Europe bring a new challenge. Germany and many other countries have learned to combat anti-Semitism. Can Germany, along with other North Atlantic countries, create the same mechanism and awareness in order to confront Islamophobia?

Thirdly, we can learn from the German commitment to serve refugees. Following World War II, every second German was displaced, or a refugee. The LWF was established to provide assistance for European, including German, refugees. In the 1940s, we were providing relief in Germany and throughout Europe. Today, we are accompanying refugees and other vulnerable populations around the globe. Today, German society, knowing the terror of war and the pain of displacement, is accepting refugees. The question for all of us in the face of this refugee crisis is not just the nationalist focus on integration and assimilation, but the goal of equipping these refugees to return to their home countries, building their own states with their own hands, just as Germany was able to do. It continues to be our duty to empower refugees to work for justice in their home context as well as in host communities.

In each of these ways, German society has demonstrated again and again what it means to be a community of love, to show how faith produces a common life rooted and grounded in love.

Love, of course, is our way of life not only with those who are the same as us, but for those who are different. As Jesus taught in his Sermon on the Mount, “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? ... And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?” (Matt. 5.46–47). Our response—both individually and collectively—to the question “Who is my neighbor?” determines the shape of the community of love.

Love within Our Global Communion

Let this message from 1 John be a word for us today, for this gathering and for the whole of our global communion:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. (1 John 4.7–11)

As Anglican writer C.S. Lewis reminds us in his book, *The Four Loves*, love goes far beyond affection or romance between humans. The Apostle Paul teaches us that “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends” (1 Cor. 13.4–8).

Love is the bond of community. It is the bond of communion. Love is the bond the Holy Trinity, the relationship of interconnected *perichoresis*.¹ Within our Lutheran tradition, we know that the witness of love emanates from the table of the Eucharist. But it is not just God's love for us; it is for the whole world. Jesus tells us that if we are "at the altar" and "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister" (Matthew 5.23–24).

Within human communities of faith, we often need to be reminded of the loving function of prophetic critique. This is the heart of Luther's distinction between the Law and the Gospel, both working to fulfill God's purposes for the human communities God loves. God's love promotes and encourages, but it also reproves and corrects.

Our communion is a place of both encouraging and reprovng, a community of debate and questioning. As Hebrews 10.24 says, we should "compete with one another in the doing of good works." Because we debate with one another, we often hear Ephesians 4.15 used as a reminder of polite discourse, telling us that we should "speak the truth in love." But we often forget the context of that passage, a critical word from Paul telling us "We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming" (4.14). Therefore, Paul says, "But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love."

I am calling today for critical engagement around the foundations of our communion. I am calling for critical conversation. We need to speak clearly with one another, naming the truth as we perceive it. While politeness has its place, the quest for 'civility' can harm the purpose of our common speech. The crises facing the world demand more than our politeness. They demand action.

But we cannot act fully without interrogating our foundational assumptions and motivations. We must also speak plainly with one another about the many cultural assumptions and material interests affecting our life together. This includes the effects of the colonial past and some practices of the present that are reminiscent of the past. It includes the financial pressures facing both historic recipients of support as well as those who are historic donors. How do we speak openly and plainly with one another about the histories of relationships that have created dependencies, opening some churches to financial benefits from other relationships? We must have these conversations, but we must have them within the clear understanding that our relationship is grounded not in money but in something far deeper, far greater—God's own love manifested in God's grace. In this communion of love, we are called to mutual responsibility for the good of the other.

We offer critique not to close off the possibility of communion, but to build one another up, even as we build up the body of Christ. The prophetic thrust of the biblical witness is

¹ In his essay, "Perichoresis: An Old Magic Word for a New Trinitarian Theology," Jürgen Moltmann suggested that perichoresis—meaning "whirl or rotation"—can be used to understand both God's internal Trinitarian relationship and human interactions as characterized by "community without uniformity, and personality without individualism." In other words, perichoresis describes a life of "community in communication." See *Trinity, Community, and Power*, ed. M. Douglas Meeks (Nashville: Kingswood, 2000), 113. See also Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 270–78. These ideas are informative for the conceptualization of our global communion itself.

always reaching out, embracing the Other, expanding the community of love. These themes must be woven into theological education throughout our global community. It is through education for all of our members, but especially for our community leaders, that we will develop communities of love. Theological education involves catechesis and dogmatics, but also our conviction that we are called to have “Passion for the Church and for the World.”

It is important, for instance, for pastoral leaders to receive basic understanding in economics, at both local and global levels. Churches can teach that different economic conditions do not mean any person is better or more moral than another. Economic awareness helps us better understand that, in most cases, one has less than another because of structural inequality and injustice.

Education for love includes learning how to live in Accompaniment relationships with one another. We have compassion for one another as we walk together on the road to Emmaus. Love drives us to pray for one another; in prayer we address God and carry one another through difficult times. Prayer strengthens not just our vertical relationship with God, but our horizontal relationship with one another. We carry one another not just with our intellect but with our hearts. It is a difficult road, but we press on, embraced by the love of the risen Lord, who makes himself known in the breaking of bread. It is through our accompaniment of one another in evangelical love that we create a sustainable Lutheran communion.

We engage the world in all of its complexity and pain, seeking to accompany all who are in need. Our call to care for the neighbor, to seek the flourishing of human communities, is not about theological indoctrination. It is about tending to the conditions of life. It is about creating communities of love. We are indeed our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers.

Leadership for Communities of Love

We educate our communities for deep engagement with the world around them. We reject simple slogans or teaching that reinforces prejudice against the Other. Ours is a more complex engagement with the world. Our church leaders cannot be technocrats and bureaucrats alone; neither should they be focused on material interests alone. Too many of our pastors are swayed by the apparent success of other traditions that we think are better or stronger than our own. Seeking after material success causes some of us to forget that a pastor or bishop is called to lead with love, not with a staff. In this way, we can unwittingly be dominated by Law, forgetting or minimizing the Gospel. The Prosperity Gospel rejects this concept of “communities of love” by ultimately teaching that God wants us to love Mammon and ourselves rather than the other. In order to inform this complex engagement, we need to revisit our global communion’s understanding of the office of the episcopate, whether called bishops or presidents. Our changing ecumenical climate demands that we grow in self-understanding about particularly Lutheran traits of the evangelical episcopacy.

Studying the role of episcopal leaders necessarily requires an investigation into ecclesiology as a whole. Is the bishop merely an implementer of democratic decisions, or is the bishop a dictator? Is the bishop merely an administrator or the chief preacher and proclaimer of the Good News? Is the bishop an evangelist, a servant, or the head of a church “tribe”?

Given the many understandings and practices of pastoral oversight throughout our global communion, it is again time to collectively study Lutheran understandings of the episcopal office. I encourage you to read again the 1982 report by the LWF “Consultation

on Episcopé” as our beginning point.² In our process of Lutheran self-understanding, reflection on the nature and purpose of our pastoral offices is central.

I’ll take this opportunity to engage the *Confessio Augustana* (CA) on these issues, offering some points I feel we need to recover to inform our spirituality and our practice. In the quotes that follow, I will keep with the German text since it was the primary basis for my Arabic translation of the CA. If someone asks “What is the Lutheran understanding of the episcopal office?” we should begin with CA, Section 28. There, we receive this simple definition: “According to the gospel, the power of the power of the keys or of the bishops is a power and command of God to preach the gospel, to forgive or retain sin, and to administer and distribute the sacraments.”³ One notices here that the role of bishop, in Lutheran understanding, is not different from the role of pastors called by congregations.

Lutherans minimize any special role for bishops in line with Luther’s radically democratic vision of the “priesthood of all believers.” As he wrote in his 1523 treatise, “That a Christian Assembly ... Has the Right and Power ... to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers,” nobody “can deny that every Christian possesses the word of God and is taught and anointed by God to be priest.”⁴ Additionally, Luther emphasized that theological formation begins at home. As he wrote in his treatise on “The Estate of Marriage” (1522), “it is certain that for their children father and mother are apostles, bishops, pastors, since they make known to them the gospel.”⁵ Pastors and bishops find their authority in making the Gospel known.

In the context for which the *Confessio Augustana* was prepared, the Evangelical community needed to address the limits of episcopal power. Again, in keeping with Luther’s thoughts on congregational authority, the CA emphasizes that while “parishioners and churches owe obedience to bishops,” their power and authority are held in check by the people and the Word. Whenever bishops “teach, institute, or introduce something contrary to the gospel, we have God’s command in such a case not to be obedient.” In other words, “our people teach that bishops do not have the power to institute or establish something contrary to the gospel” and that it is “patently contrary to God’s command and Word to make laws out of opinions.”⁶ The authority of bishops, like all pastors, is therefore subject to the loving, liberating command of the gospel. The gospel, thus, remains our ultimate authority. This also reminds us that tremendous power resides as a result in the people rather than in the bishop’s office alone.

Finally, the CA emphasizes Peter’s teaching that bishops must not exercise domination over their flocks: “St. Peter prohibits the bishops to rule as if they had the power to force the churches to do whatever they desired [1 Peter 5.2]. Now the question is not how to take power away from the bishops. Instead, we desire and ask that they would not force consciences to sin.” The Latin version puts it this way: “that [bishops] permit the teaching of the gospel in its purity and relax those few observances that cannot be kept without

² Department of Studies (LWF), “Lutheran Understanding of the Episcopal Office: Statement by the Consultation on Episcopé” (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1983).

³ “The Augsburg Confession,” in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. R. Kolb and T. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), page 92, (CA xxviii.5). Hereafter, CA.

⁴ Martin Luther, “That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the Right and Power to Judge All Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture” (1523), LW 39:309.

⁵ Martin Luther, “The Estate of Marriage” (1522), LW 45:46.

⁶ CA xxviii.22–23.

sin.”⁷ Because of the CA’s overwhelming emphasis on the freedom of the gospel, the primary function of the bishop is not rule over the church, but, as much as possible, to *relax* rules and *release* consciences.

If we return fully to this understanding of our central confession, our church would be guided by an *episcopé* of love. As Luther wrote in his sermons on the Sermon on the Mount, “God did not give you your gifts for you to tickle yourself with them, but for you to help your neighbor with them when he needs it, and thus by your strength to bear his weakness, by your piety and honor to cover up his sin and conceal his shame, as God through Christ has done for you and still does every day.”⁸ With leadership informed by these commitments, we can indeed become a community of love, participating globally in God’s mission of love.

Participating in God’s Mission of Love

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3.16–17). The mission of God is a mission of love, for God so loved the world, and God *is* love. Participating in this mission—as individual disciples, but also as congregations and even our global communion—means that we seek to participate in God’s community of love.

Our Communion Office, especially the Department for Mission and Development (DMD), has a key role to play in strengthening relationships among our member churches so we might participate together in God’s mission of love. The LWF has a strong history of strengthening our member churches. Already in 1970, in Evian, the LWF supported smaller, independent churches. In the spirit of love, we have learned how to share the love of Christ between North and South without one controlling the other. We called it church cooperation. Today, this is the basis of Accompaniment.

“Mission in Context” boldly proclaimed that “Theology should empower the church for mission, a mission that points to the reality of and participates in the inbreaking reign of God in Christ.” It invited churches to engage contextually in order to “empower churches to unfold their holistic mission as accompaniment to people in every place, in their ever-changing contexts—a transforming, reconciling, and empowering mission.”⁹

Accompaniment is an enriching relationship for all involved. How can I bring the richness of my spirituality to the North, and the East bring its spirituality to the West? Together, we provide a holistic witness to God’s love. How can we promote and further strengthen church cooperation, seeking how, in pulpit and altar fellowship, we are together in mission? Together, we are bringing a Gospel of Love to a world in need of God’s love.

In this, I return to the theme of one of my earlier addresses to this council: The Discipleship of Equals. Each member church of the LWF, and each member of all congregations throughout our global communion, stands in fundamental equality with one another before God, *coram Deo*. As Jesus said to the disciples, “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father” (John 15.15).

⁷ CA xxviii.76–77.

⁸ Martin Luther, “Sermon on the Mount,” LW 21:218.

⁹ Lutheran World Federation, *Mission in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment* (Geneva: LWF, 2004), 61.

The justice we seek to establish in the world, we also seek within our global communion. Fundamental equality therefore cannot be separated from our strong commitment to gender justice in both society and church. As Paul proclaimed to the early church, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3.28).

Today, mission must move in all directions, with the South sending missionaries to the North, where missionaries from Indonesia, Tanzania, Palestine and elsewhere could accompany Lutherans in Germany and elsewhere seeking to best respond to new arrivals from the Muslim-majority world. Our shared participation in God's mission of love, not money, is the determining factor of our relationship. Churches and development agencies have an opportunity to work side-by-side with sisters and brothers in the Global South who, through their churches, are contributing to nation-building and the general building strengthening of civil society through peace education, health care, gender justice and other efforts. Through Accompaniment, our communion of love thrives through two-way mission grounded in equality and justice.

Xenophobia: The Antithesis of Love

The goal of forming a community of love is today challenged by the rise of xenophobia. Extremism has taken many forms in world. For us, as religious leaders, the most troubling form is religious or religiously-sanctioned extremism. But we are now seeing troubling reactions in the North Atlantic world that promote militarism and threaten thoughtful responses to human suffering.

In addition to religiously-sanctioned extremism, we are seeing the rise of ethnic and nativist extremisms in the North Atlantic. There is a sense among many in Europe, for instance, that the refugees streaming out of Syria and Iraq are coming to take a portion of European bread. These fears have led to the formation of groups like PEGIDA (*Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes*). As a Christian living in a context with many Muslim neighbors, I am grateful that Chancellor Merkel has spoken out against groups like PEGIDA and has offered the positive statement that refugees can contribute to the building of German society.

In the United States as well, politicians are taking advantage of new anxieties among white populations to advance their agendas. Criticisms of Donald Trump, for instance, have not resulted in debates about policy, but attacks against women, against African Americans, against Mexicans, Muslims, and Jews. All of this coincides with fears felt by some white Americans that they are becoming a minority in the US alongside the plurality of so-called minorities. Those who fear the loss of white supremacy are raising alarms in social media about multiculturalism being a form of "white genocide." We see another example of desired ethnic domination in South Africa with the Economic Freedom Fighters advocating that only black citizens should benefit from state and economic structures and in India, where we see troubling reports of attacks on African living on the sub-continent.¹⁰ Is the world moving toward acceptance of discrimination and fascism? What is the role of our communion and our member churches in confronting these forms of xenophobia?

In this climate, some people have criticized His Holiness, Pope Francis, for bringing Muslim refugees with him from Greece to the Vatican, saying he should tend to the needs of Christians alone. Is this not the antithesis of love? Some circles would say that

¹⁰ See "Threat to our democracy must be stopped in tracks," on South Africa, and "India rocked by racist attacks on Africans living on sub-continent," *The Sunday Independent* (June 5, 2016), 17.

we should only accept Christians. Is this not the antithesis of love? When the present political crisis erupted in Iraq and Syria, it did not separate Christians, Muslims and Yazidis, atheist and agnostic. Our global refugee crisis is a human crisis; it demands a response that is characterized by love.

Some have challenged the LWF commitment to serve every human being without regard to religious identification, gender, ethnicity, or political affiliation. They wonder why we are not serving the Lutherans and other Christians before others. But this is the very strength of our holistic mission, including our prophetic diakonia. Our aim is to help humanity; in responding to human vulnerability, we hear the call of Christ who has come to each of us in our need. If Jesus had loved only those who were like him, none of us in this room would ever have known his love. Jesus taught us clearly in the parable of the Good Samaritan that all human beings are our neighbors when it comes to fulfilling the commandment "Love your neighbor as yourself."

We must learn Peter's lesson in Acts 10: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." God's incarnation in our Lord Jesus Christ sanctifies every human being. Our service to all embodies what the Apostle Paul called "faith active in love" (Galatians 5.6). If our faith is only selfish and egocentric or focused on the church alone, then the salt has lost its saltiness and the leaven will have lost its power (Matthew 5). If we serve ourselves alone, we lose the meaning of love. Acting together, our member churches, down to every congregation, serve 2.7 million refugees throughout the world. This legacy of service must continue in the Lutheran communion. This is our expression of love.

In its religious and in its ethnocentric and nationalist forms, extremism is the antithesis of love. These forms of extremism are expressed when people feel the loss of their collective power or sense a desire that creating a world of sameness (homogeneity) will increase their power. This is sin on a large scale: *incurvatus in se*, turned in on the self. Such extremism seeks to create homogeneous communities. But those communities are the the antithesis of love.

If religious extremism is the antithesis of love, the quest for meaningful and prophetic interreligious engagement is a loving act. I am proud to serve on Jordan's Royal Committee that distributes prizes for Interfaith Harmony Week. This year, we had 81 proposals for projects that bring together Christians, Muslims, and many other religions. Throughout the world, there are groups working prophetically, swimming against the growing tide of extremism. Each of these proposals represents a community seeking to live with a plurality of religions, promoting diversity, and respecting the dignity of all. In this way, we can build communities of love far beyond the boundaries of Lutherans or Christians alone.

Earlier this year, I attended a very important conference on Muslim-Christian relations in Morocco, under the theme of "The Rights of Religious Minorities in the Muslim World." The gathering produced what has been called the Marrakesh Declaration. It was a tremendous gathering of muftis, *waqf* (Islamic endowment and trust) ministers, and scholars from throughout the Islamic world, from Bangladesh to Morocco to the United States. They came to speak about the status of religious minorities under Muslim rule, according to the Islamic *shari'a*. At one point during the conference, I was given the opportunity to stand and speak. As I said to these 500 Islamic scholars from throughout the Muslim world, I have been a Christian living in the Holy Land since the first Pentecost; when Islamic rule came, Arab Christians played a role in developing Islamic governments and cultures. This is the reason I refuse to be considered a minority and I don't have the minority complex. I refuse to be *dhimmi* (a community protected by the Muslim ruler) because I don't want to be protected by any religion. I instead promoted the idea of equal citizenship with equal rights and equal responsibilities that embraces

diversity. In our present stage of global political development, these rights appear to be secured best under the constitution of a democratic state that respects pluralism.

Among its many conclusions, the Marrakesh Declaration offered these three calls:

- Call upon Muslim scholars and intellectuals around the world to develop a jurisprudence of the concept of “citizenship” which is inclusive of diverse groups. Such jurisprudence shall be rooted in Islamic tradition and principles and mindful of global changes.
- Call upon representatives of the various religions, sects and denominations to confront all forms of religious bigotry, vilification, and denigration of what people hold sacred, as well as all speech that promote hatred and bigotry; and to
- Affirm that it is unconscionable to employ religion for the purpose of aggressing upon the rights of religious minorities in Muslim countries.¹¹

Leaders within the Muslim world are moving to confront extremism, raising their collective voice for robust moderation. We must do all we can to accompany these Muslim institutions, colleagues, and neighbors in this monumental challenge, encouraging them and helping them communicate their message throughout the world. These initiatives are far more effective than bombs and invasions.

Today, when extremists are kidnapping commitments to diversity and equal citizenship; we in the Communion must bring these principles into public conversation. We can raise these issues in our countries and in international forums, including the United Nations. Three things, I suggest, must be done: First, speech within religious communities, in houses of worship and in religious media must be changed in order to foster acceptance of the otherness of the other. Religious leaders must be challenged to accept the reality of difference. Second, educational curricula must be changed in order to incorporate respectful teaching about other religious traditions, with Christians focusing on seeing the image of God in others. Thirdly, media outlets should be challenged to promote moderation and equal citizenship rather than promoting sensationalist coverage of extremist bloodshed and terror. Why should extremists be rewarded with excessive coverage of heinous acts?

We must lead through the strong yet quiet witness of robust moderation. People in many countries are living without equal citizenship, without a constitution respecting rights and freedoms. Diversity should not be the gateway of extremism but should be the gateway of dignity and equality, the foundation of a Community of Love. We Arab Christians are ready to share the learning from 1400 years of living with Islam with all countries now experiencing Muslims and encountering Islam in very different ways. We find, however, that even our expertise is rejected by western bias. To slightly modify an earlier quote from my adviser, Rev. Dr. Robert Smith, “If [Arab] Christians cannot be understood as suffering under the yoke of Islamic oppression, they must be comprehended as having ‘sided’ with Islam and therefore as having forfeited [North Atlantic] Christian accompaniment and solidarity.”¹² We are promoting neighborly relations. Now is the time for heightened, expanded dialogue between religious communities, beginning with renewed efforts to confront anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, including refugee-phobia. The world needs it; the world stands in need of our witness of love. As a

¹¹ See the full text of the Declaration at <http://www.marrakeshdeclaration.org/marrakesh-declaration.html>

¹² Robert O. Smith, “Toward a Lutheran Response to Christian Zionism,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 48:3 (Fall 2009), 286.

Lutheran communion, we have all means to influence our world with the love we experience on the Cross from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Preparing in Love for 2017

Love is needed not only in our relationships with people of other religions, but in our relationships with other Christians. Sometimes, it is more difficult to act lovingly with your own family members than it is with people outside your house!

We have prepared extremely well for the joint commemorations of the Reformation that will come next year. We begin this process this October, in Lund. This is not a time for competition or jealousy. This is not a time for triumphalism. How would those attitudes communicate love? We must instead ask what God's purposes might be for us in 2017. How might we hope to witness to the Gospel of Love in Christ Jesus?

We have been working closely with other churches, especially the Roman Catholic Church. In Lund, our joint celebration will be an event of historic reconciliation. We are happy that this is the harvest of the fruit of the Holy Spirit that has brought us to this point. We must allow the Holy Spirit to work in us in her own way, in her own time. We must ask the Holy Spirit where she will lead us. As we learn from the Acts of the Apostles, the Spirit always precedes us (Acts 4); we should not rush. I express my deep gratitude to the General Secretary, Martin Junge, and the Office of Ecumenical Relations who have worked well with the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity and Cardinal Koch to bring us to this blessed moment. We also thank the Church of Sweden that has accepted to co-host this commemoration locally with the Catholic Diocese of Sweden. This is a time to show our unity and our love to each other, even as we respect our continued differences.

Our ecumenical relationships extend far beyond the Roman Catholic Church. We are quite pleased to recognize and cooperate with the many other churches of the Reformation. We work in a complementary way with many churches of the Reformation to strengthen our mutual witness to the Gospel. Any achievement of one is an achievement for all of us. We rejoice with it. We should see those efforts being undertaken by other churches of the Reformation as part of the same evangelical movement, part of the message of love we carry to our global communion.

It is my sense that the commemorations of the Reformation will best witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ if we approach these things in a spirit of repentance and confession. We must ask the forgiveness of those whom we or others in our communion have wronged. We must build on our apology to the Mennonite community. We must renew our repudiation of Luther's anti-Jewish writings. We might also consider the need to study and repudiate the heritage of Luther's anti-Muslim writings in light of contemporary Islamophobia. What does the context of the Reformation tell us about Muslim-Christian relations today? How can we better promote a sense of reconciliation in order to build communities of love? Finally, as we approach commemorations of the Reformation, it is vital for us to not become focused only on the past or only on the internal lives of our churches. We must instead plan a future for our community of love, asking what is calling us for the next 50 years. In prayer and discernment, we seek the Holy Spirit's work in our communion, joining all ecumenical partners in the mission of love.

Extending God's Love to the World

As we look ahead toward 2017, we are again called to be the church for the sake of the world. We are facing global crises of politics, economics, ecology and health. Human communities are at risk. Through our work with and through our cities, villages, national governments and international organizations, we will continue to address the world's dire conditions. The same values that guide our relationships within our global communion guide our approach to the world. While progress has been made in some areas, much work remains to be done.

I will take this opportunity to provide an update on my home context in Jerusalem, a city to the three religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—as well as to both Israelis and Palestinians. The years 2016 and 2017 provide important opportunities for us, as a communion, to engage this vital topic. This year marks 100 years since the Sykes-Picot Agreement, in which British and French diplomats Mark Sykes and François Georges-Picot drew the map of the contemporary Middle East, dividing the soon-defeated Ottoman Empire into areas of British and French control and influence.

Similar agreements and plans have been made to divide up other territories, often without regard for the human communities living there for centuries, now divided by imperially imposed borders. The African continent is separated by the straight lines of colonial boundaries. Latin America, colonized for centuries, continues to be manipulated and exploited by alien interests. In the Middle East, we are now at the point of deciding whether or not to accept Sykes-Picot lines of imperial division. Even as those century-old lines fade, new possibilities may be emerging.

The breakdown of Sykes-Picot borders and challenges to many forms of governance in the region indicates a period of great transition. In this context, some theorists are advocating for the recognition or creation of ethnically- and religiously-identified states. Such political entities become highly problematic for ethnic and religious minorities, including Christians, who understand themselves as woven into the fabric of their societies. When European and American commentators suggest that the Middle East should be divided according to religion and ethnicity, we wonder if they have forgotten the destruction and suffering of the Thirty Years' War. At the same time, we in the Middle East have seen that western ideas about secularism and democracy cannot be simplistically imposed.

Churches in the Middle East, along with neighbors of other religious communities, must be heavily involved in shaping the future of the region. In order to do so, we must engage in our own independent analysis. With Talal Asad, a Muslim scholar in the United States, we must ask fundamental questions about “the categories offered by liberal theory” and consider the possibility that we, as churches, can “contribute to the formulation of very different political futures in which other traditions can thrive.”¹³ In order to engage fully in this task, we must interrogate not only the structures of political thought in the Islamic world, but fundamentally question “the assumption that Western modernity is not only the standard by which all contemporary developments must be judged, but also the only authentic trajectory for every tradition.”¹⁴

In order to secure our preferred political futures in the Middle East, Arab Christians urgently need to develop indigenous political philosophies. I have argued that our political future must be based in states based on the value of equal citizenship grounded

¹³ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1993), 306.

¹⁴ Interview, “Talal Asad, Modern Power and the Reconfiguration of Religious Traditions” by Saba Mahmood. *Stanford Humanities Review* 5:1 (1996), available online at <http://www.stanford.edu/group/SHR/5-1/text/asad.html>.

in a common constitution which respects all ethnicities and religions. All churches emerging from western Christian traditions—including our global communion—need to cultivate awareness about their intellectual situatedness and locatedness if they hope to fully support Middle Eastern Christians and other communities facing ethnic and religious pressures. Only when we engage in our own creative analysis can churches engage deeply with policymakers while bringing a more liberative vision to the entire world.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to be the core problem of the Middle East. This was true by the time Sykes and Picot drew their map in 1916, through the British Mandate, and on to today. But the conflict is neglected today because of the terrible challenges in Iraq and Syria. Europe is very involved in the question of refugees; most Europeans, however, are not asking now these challenges came to be. When I met with the French Prime Minister's office, they were convinced of the connections between these challenges. France, along with many other countries, are faced with growing anti-Semitism alongside growing Islamophobia. Resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict helps address both of these movements, meaning that transforming the conflict is not just in Israeli, Palestinian, and Arab interest; it is a North Atlantic interest as well.

For all of these reasons, I am very happy that the Government of France has moved forward with creating a multilateral approach to addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The French plan, rejected by some governments, is based on UN resolutions 242 and 338 as well as on the Arab Peace Initiative (API). The API commits that if the State of Israel allows for a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders, then 57 Islamic and Arab countries will accept normalized diplomatic relations with Israel. Churches in the world should support this initiative and the international conference, leading toward a just, viable, sustainable two-state solution. Each of these emphases is in broad agreement with the many resolutions the LWF has taken in its councils and assemblies. Some churches have considered moving further in their policies. Challenging the occupation means not only engaging in politics, but addressing the cultural and theological underpinnings of Israel's settlement enterprise, both the Jewish extremism of the settler movement and the Christian Zionism found in many churches. Additionally, the Church of the Rhineland has asked fellow churches in Germany to recognize the State of Palestine, in agreement with what has already been done by the Vatican and the Government of Sweden. These are fine steps that provide civil society support for urgent diplomatic efforts. These give hope in a hopeless situation.

The international, multilateral deal to control Iran's nuclear program has global significance. The deal shows that power is shifting throughout the world, that we can solve problems through dialogue, not through bombing. This shows that if world powers build alliances for the purposes of justice, they succeed. If, in the same way, the world will support a multinational effort to agree on an end-game for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, justice will succeed and a comprehensive, durable solution will be found.

It is time that we work to develop liberative theologies that analyze and transform these realities. While we have now begun to fully accept the liberation theologies of Oscar Romero and Gustavo Gutiérrez, we have not wholeheartedly maintained their spirit of independent analysis and independent inquiry. This is the legacy appropriate to all churches who have learned the lessons of the Reformation.

People often ask me how they and their churches can help us in Jerusalem. What statement can we issue or resolution can be passed that will benefit your people? These are generous questions. Although we cannot advise you directly on every topic, please allow me to share some thoughts that can be helpful.

During the past couple of years, the Fellowship of Middle East Evangelical Churches (FMEEC) has held two conferences on sustaining Christian presence in the Middle East, supported by both the LWF and the World Council of Churches. During these conferences, we have focused on developing a theology of our mission and vision in the Middle East that will be supported by our partner churches throughout the world. Such a theology that does not see our presence as a burden or for the sake of presence alone, but presence as a witness in our world for the gospel of love and the sake of moderation. We have also discussed the need for specifically supporting the presence of the evangelical churches that were created in the nineteenth century as a direct result of mission activities. While they are few in number, each of these churches are witnessing in very difficult circumstances; all of them are facing difficult financial challenges due to the overwhelming pressures of political crisis and religious extremism. FMEEC leaders have asked that if the world is interested in the future of Christians in the Middle East, they should allow those churches to be financially sustainable.

I call your attention as well to the wisdom of Proverbs 31.8: “Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all the destitute.” The church should be prophetic. When it is prophetic, the church looks for the place, as Psalm 85 puts it, where “love and faithfulness will meet,” where “righteousness and peace will kiss each other.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a young German pastor who led resistance efforts during the Third Reich, suggested that the church acts as the conscience of the state since “the church is what leads government to an understanding of itself.”¹⁵ Allow your Christian conscience to speak against any kind of injustice, or oppression, or occupation for the sake of humanity, for the sake of both occupier and occupied. This will not be the safest and easiest possible route in relation to Israel and Palestine, but it will be the path toward peace based on justice.

Together, we must engage in prophetic leadership, both in Palestine and around the world. Our responsibility is to accompany one another like the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Even if we are confused and despondent, we will encounter Christ in the Eucharist and in our burning hearts. And in Christ, our witness will be strengthened, sending us out as ministers of reconciliation, brokers of justice, and apostles of love.

In April of this year, I was pleased to participate in an historic meeting of the heads of churches in the United States with the heads of churches in Jerusalem. I hope that we are able to promote the same type of meeting in other countries, not just the US. It is vital that we renew our efforts to help Arab Christians, including Palestinians, stay in their homelands, even as we support multi-lateral efforts to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the core problem of the Middle East.

As we look forward to the 2017 Assembly in Namibia, where we will focus on the theme “Liberated by God’s Grace,” I pray that we will use our time in Wittenberg to consider deeply the many events and people in the city which helped shape our Lutheran identity. We can focus on Luther himself, while also giving due attention to Katharina von Bora, Philip Melancthon, and Johannes Bugenhagen. We can also consider the important social implications of the Reformation, including the rules surrounding poor relief through the Wittenberg community chest and the transformation of educational priorities. Far from only looking back, however, our commitment to promote communities of love drives us toward discerning God’s will for the world and our Global Communion. May our

¹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “A Theological Position Paper on State and Church,” in *Conspiracy and Imprisonment 1940–1945: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 16*, English ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 522.

Assembly in Namibia produce the energy and purpose for discerning the future of our Communion and the holistic mission to which we are called.

As we go toward our Assembly, we bring diverse gifts and talents from throughout our global communion. Every one of our churches has developed a deep, contextual, and distinctively Lutheran spirituality. Our challenge is to bring all of this richness to Windhoek, accompanying one another there in order to continue creating a beautiful tapestry of the global Lutheran communion, moving from its particular local expressions, rooted and grounded in love for the sake of the world.

May God bless you and this gathering. Amen.