THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

A Communion of Churches

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# MESSAGE

## Introduction

We, the 309 delegates of the Twelfth Lutheran World Federation Assembly, gathered, prayed, deliberated and broke bread together from 10 to 16 May 2017 under the theme "Liberated by God's Grace" in Windhoek, Namibia. From various parts of the world, large and small churches, we represent 145 member churches from 98 countries and over 75 million Lutherans.

In 2017, we commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. This journey has brought us from 1517 to 2017; "here we stand" and "here we journey." We have experienced and witnessed the joy, love and hospitality of the United Church Council of the Namibia Evangelical Lutheran Churches and celebrated the risen Christ dwelling in our midst.

During this assembly, we have again encountered and wrestled with the presence of sin today that continues to hold human beings and creation captive. As the Apostle Paul writes, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal 5:1). Liberated by God's grace, we are freed from sin to turn outward to thankfully and joyfully love and serve our neighbor ("Freedom of a Christian," 1520). We cry out from our diverse contexts: "Salvation—not for sale," "Human beings—not for sale" and "Creation—not for sale."

## Liberated by God's grace

In the world today, many social and economic factors put "freedom" to the test. The production of wealth is prized above all else and the commodification of human beings and creation is normalized. No space is safe from violence. If we merely comply with these ideas, we deny the fullness of the Body of Christ.

In Christ, God's love is given as a free and unconditional gift. It allows us to express our gratitude through a caring engagement with the whole of creation. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God" (Eph 2:8). This understanding of liberating grace continues to influence all aspects of the life and self-understanding of our communion. We recognize three key areas of gift and call:

## Reconciliation and commemoration

The God of Israel continues to reconcile us to Godself, to one another and all creation. We recognize and give thanks for the ecumenical and interreligious dialogue partners of the LWF.

We rejoice in the fruits of ecumenical dialogues while continuing to experience the pain of division. We give thanks for the historic 2010 action of repentance and reconciliation within the Lutheran-Mennonite dialogue and the positive actions since. Through documents such as the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1999) and "From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran–Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017 (2013)," we have learned to perceive our joint history not from the viewpoint of differences but of unity. We have witnessed to the power of God's liberating grace by common prayer and public witness events such as the historic joint ecumenical commemoration of the Reformation on 31 October 2016 in Lund and Malmö, Sweden. Such experiences enliven us for the ministry of reconciliation entrusted to us.

The 500th anniversary of the Reformation is also an occasion for the communion to reflect on what it means to be Lutheran in today's multi-religious world. Work is being done to build bridges across religious divides and to collaborate for the common good. Interreligious competencies, pastoral care for interreligious families and continued interreligious dialogue and collaboration will be essential for the continued liberation and reconciliation of all.

There are also situations within society that call out for God's liberating grace. Two specific examples of the need for this kind of reconciliation are the painful memories that cloud the relations of our host country Namibia with Germany as well as the ongoing conflict in the Holy Land.[1] We affirm and long for reconciliation in all places where God's liberation is needed.

## Communion and context

The LWF document, "The Self-understanding of the Lutheran Communion," describes the LWF as a communion marked by "unity in reconciled diversity" (p. 5). Each member church is shaped by its context and called into unity in Christ. No church is too big or too small—each carries their unique tone in the communion choir.

We remain open to the presence of Christ and the hospitality of the other. We strive to be a communion that continues to confess the Triune God and to agree in the proclamation of the Word of God. We are united in altar and pulpit fellowship (LWF constitution, 3.1). In an increasingly polarized world, it is more important than ever for the communion to accompany churches as they navigate their contextual realities and trans-contextual gospel. We continue the Emmaus conversation on family, marriage and sexuality as discussed by the LWF Council at Bogota in 2012, and dialogue on other important issues such as colonization, commodification, racism, women in ordained ministry, biblical hermeneutics and gender. At the foot of the cross, we find our unity in Christ. Right relationships of accountability and autonomy will deepen our next phase of communion building and we seek the wisdom to follow and to lead into that future.

## Prophetic diakonia

As an act of resistance against the economic and monastic culture of his time, Martin Luther established the common chest—a shared fund to feed the poor. On the fifth

[1] During the Assembly, the LWF approved the public statement on "Reconciliation with respect to Genocide in Namibia," and the resolution on Israel-Palestine.

commandment, Luther reflects, "We should fear and love God so that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and support him in every physical need" ("Luther's Small Catechism"). The freedom of being a Christian compels us to care for our neighbor's needs.

We give thanks for the continuing work and diaconal ministry of the LWF Department for World Service, the ACT Alliance, of which the LWF is a founding member and that of ecumenical partners. We give thanks for new partnerships in humanitarian relief with agencies such as Islamic Relief Worldwide and Caritas Internationalis. Our self-understanding as a communion is strengthened by our cooperation in loving compassion for the "least of these."

As the global community strives toward the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, churches in all countries commit or re-commit to doing their part to care for those often forgotten and excluded. For those making the long journey, whether across great distances or simply from day to day, may our acts of diaconal service continue to enliven our witness to a world and creation desperately crying out for liberation and justice.

## Salvation—not for Sale

Salvation restores the life-giving relationship between God and God's creation. It redeems, liberates, heals, transforms, uplifts, empowers, reconciles and justifies. Salvation is a free gift. It cannot be earned, because God in Christ has given it freely. We must share this Good News of liberation freely, as it was first shared with us in Christ. Salvation cannot be sold because it cannot be owned. Salvation is not for sale!

Just as in Martin Luther's time, salvation is commodified today in ways that manipulate, extort, build false hope and even kill. False interpretations of salvation, including the prevalence of the prosperity gospel, are again being sold in the marketplace.

We recognize that the free gift of salvation is both personal and collective. This gift unbinds us to experience and participate in salvation through solidarity. The revival of the church and the full expression of holistic mission in our homes, church and society depend on the true freedom of all.

In holistic mission, proclamation of the liberating gospel, advocacy and *diakonia* must be accomplished and mutually shared in creative ways.

## Human Beings—not for Sale

"God created humankind in his image" (Gen 1:26–27). Every human being has the same inherent value and dignity. While the Universal Declaration of Human Rights outlines many of these principles, people of faith know that beings created in the image of God *(imago Dei)* are liberated not just to survive, but to thrive with abundant life.

In Baptism, we are called and empowered to participate in God's mission (*missio Dei*) as followers of Jesus, coworkers in promoting justice, peace and reconciliation. While economic and political ideologies seek to commodify the gifts of human life, we proclaim that human beings are not for sale!

The church should resist mechanisms of exclusion and strive to embody reconciling mechanisms of inclusion through our fellowship, worship and diaconal service. Equal access to common goods and decision-making processes, safety, especially for those who

are vulnerable and meaningful participation and interaction among all groups are essential to this task. We commend the LWF "Church in the Public Space" (2016) resource for use and study in the member churches.

## Full participation for all

In 1984, the LWF began to move towards the 40/40/20 quota commitments for inclusive representation for women, men and youth. We commend the Twelfth Assembly for meeting this quota overall. In local contexts, many, especially women and youth, are not fully represented.

We give thanks for the witness and work of the 55 LWF young reformer projects and the 25,000 people touched by these efforts. Youth have been leading the way on issues that are critical to our communion and striving toward full participation through intergenerational conversation and shared leadership.

Since 1984, the LWF has affirmed women's participation in the ordained ministry. We applaud the 119 member churches that currently ordain those called, both male and female. As the communion continues to journey with those still on the way, we urge the member church which has ceased ordaining women to develop a process and timeline to reconsider this decision. The LWF Gender Justice Policy, now available in 23 languages, should be studied and implemented in all member churches.

## Gender-based violence and violence against women in church and society

We live in a world where at least one in three women will experience gender-based violence. Rape committed as a war crime is the painful reality for all too many. Created in the image of God, violence based on gender is unacceptable. Churches have a responsibility to address power imbalances present in patriarchal societies, and to address stigma and taboos through appropriate and comprehensive sexual education. Conversations about gender inclusivity, gender roles, masculinity and transformative partnership are essential to this task.

Silence and shame, misinformation and manipulation can often be compounded within church settings. The church must be a safe space for all and perpetrators have to be held accountable. Code of conduct trainings, policies and studies such as the 2002 LWF document "Churches Say No to Violence against Women" are helpful starting places for all churches and organizations.

## Rising inequality

Significant progress has been made to alleviate extreme poverty. Still, we live in an age where the "top eight richest people in the world control as much wealth as the bottom third of the global population."[2] Resource distribution, access and policies that allow extreme wealth accumulation must be addressed. Racism, caste and tribalism often aggravate these factors. We commend all church-related and faith-based diaconal ministries and advocacy that work to alleviate poverty. We call on churches and related

[2] www.oxfamamerica.org/explore/stories/just-8-people-now-have-the-same-wealth-as-the-poorest-36-billion/

organizations everywhere to stand up and demand fair redistribution of wealth and social protection as a matter of justice and human rights for all.

## Vocation and meaningful work

For Luther, every person is free to understand their life's work as a calling in which they can communicate God's love. All too often, today's neoliberal market economy reduces human beings to commodities. This robs us of our human dignity and meaningful work. Human trafficking, forced labor, wage theft and predatory lending prohibit full inclusion and participation in the public space. Overwork, under- and unemployment continue to devalue the future of a generation and our world. Push/pull factors such as wage discrepancy and job market opportunities siphon away educated and skilled professionals, leaving many communities feeling the effect of the "brain drain."

## Education

Education is one possible mechanism of inclusion. Lutherans have promoted education for 500 years and must take responsibility to continue this legacy. We advocate for free, accessible quality education for all at all levels in their first language. Gender-sensitive and intersectional theological education, exchange programs and dialogue opportunities between Lutheran churches and interfaith communities can also operate as positive mechanisms for inclusion and transformation.

## Refugees and displaced persons

65 million people are displaced in the world today. We give thanks for the gift of the LWF department for world service that welcomes 2.5 million refugees and displaced persons in 24 countries. We request the LWF Communion Office to continue advocating on behalf of refugees and migrants and support member churches in developing their capacity to receive refugees and provide long-term development services to enhance their self-reliance. We affirm localized training and the use of LWF resources, such as "Welcoming the Stranger: Affirmations for Faith Leaders" (2013).

## Advocacy

Advocacy is an integral part of our communion's public witness. Addressing accountability with decision makers and duty holders, both within and outside the church, is essential. We resist the increasing presence of polarization, populism, protectionism and post-truth and we encourage Lutherans to continue to focus on establishing effective legislation that ensures freedom, equality, rights and dignity of every human being.

## Creation—not for Sale

God is creator of heaven and earth, and each part of creation is inherently good. As people who confess faith in the Trinity, we profess that God is relational. God creates and enlivens creation as the source of all being, not as an outside observer. Christ died and rose again for all of creation. Today, all creation groans under the weight of imbalance, overuse and misuse. Many enjoy abundance while some want even for daily bread. As a

global community, we consume 1.6 planets a year—and our consumption continues to increase.

Human beings are created cocreators with God. We must resist the temptation and misinterpretation to act as masters with dominion over creation, but must rather act as stewards with responsibility to cultivate and care in coexistence with creation. The endless pursuit of growth and accumulation of wealth is often seen as the end goal, but we believe that the well-being of creation is God's intent and goal. Creation is not for sale! Climate change affects each place differently. But in the web of creation, we recognize that solutions for climate change are both global and local.

## Education and alternative economic models

We must proclaim the truth about the dominant economic model of our age. In pursuit of economic growth, the land, sea and all their creatures have become commodities. This is an injustice! We seek alternative economic models that serve the well-being of all creation. Through general and theological education, the church can promote local and global efforts to equip this generation for positive change. The LWF can assist member churches to develop theologically robust programs of conservation, environmentally conscious lifestyle choices and advocacy.

## Exchange, story sharing and advocacy

We affirm the work of the LWF in creation care, especially that of the LWF youth desk at Conference of Parties (COP) summits. We lift up the variety of work and ministry already done in local contexts and encourage the LWF to offer trainings and capacity building, especially for exchanges and story sharing. This globalized witness will strengthen member churches to lift up their unique voices. The presence of multinational corporations complicates nationally-based advocacy, but creative partnerships between churches as well as with civil and private sector partners can also strengthen our efforts.

## Liberating grace—the call we share

God's liberating grace fills us with faith, hope and love to participate in God's mission in this world. In this 500th Reformation year, we profess a message that the world needs today as much as ever: Salvation—not for Sale; Human Beings—not for Sale; and Creation—not for Sale! Liberated by the Triune God, we pray for the clarity and courage to go out enlivened by God's transformative, reconciling and empowering presence in our relationships, church and society.

Communion (*koinonia)* is a precious gift received by God's grace and it is also a task. The problems of this age need not define us. Earthly structures and forms may fall, but in Christ Jesus, sin and death have no power over us. Freed by grace through faith, we are liberated to be a church in service with the neighbor.

Let us share fully in each other's joys and sorrows; let us pray for one another and share our resources, spiritual and material, wherever possible. Let us resist the temptation to turn in on ourselves in sin. As Christ Jesus said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10). We are liberated by God's grace and go out joyfully to accept this call.