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A Lutheran Perspective on
Religion and Development

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Introduction: A Lutheran Perspective on Religion and Development

Change is not sustainable if it does not relate to people's beliefs and values. Religion, faith and spirituality are major value sources that shape people's deepest convictions, attitudes and behavior. According to a study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2012, more than eight-in-ten people identify with a religious group.¹ Religion therefore provides the basic frame of reference for most people, touching their hearts, minds and actions.

In recent years, the importance of addressing religion as a crucial factor for social change, and hence any development effort, has increasingly been discussed in the development sector. Out of this renewed interest in matters of faith a new international discourse on "religion and development" has emerged, which centers around two thematic areas: Addressing religion as a cross-cutting issue and contextual factor in development

and addressing religious actors as partners in development.

As a communion of 145 churches around the world, the Lutheran World Federation's humanitarian and development work is firmly rooted in the Christian faith and Christian values. Since 1947 the LWF has been involved in implementing humanitarian response and development programs on all continents. Following a human rights based approach, the LWF has also been engaged in advocacy on a local, national and global level.

By looking at faith actors and matters of faith more closely, the religion and development discourse directly relates to us as one particular FBO. It offers a secular perspective that challenges us to look at ourselves as faith-based actors from the outside, as well as to articulate our faith-based voice in these conversations from the inside. Therefore, in 2012, the LWF started a program on religion and

development in order to contribute to the international discourse with the following two objectives:

- Clarify the theological rationale for the LWF's development work and provide theological resources for the LWF, related local development actors and churches
- Strengthen the engagement and understanding of the LWF and its partners as FBOs in the development world and clarify the commitment to its values

This brochure attempts to offer such a two-fold contribution to the recent religion and development discourse, and thus addresses all actors engaged in the debate—faith-based and secular agencies, academics and practitioners.

The first part describes the discourse, including the role of religion

as both help and hindrance from a development and humanitarian perspective and a critical assessment of the risks and challenges entailed in the debate. Within the international discourse, development is primarily regarded as an absolute concept that generally is not questioned.

In the second part, a Lutheran inside perspective is offered by clearly

outlining the faith basis and resulting values that inform the LWF's understanding of development and guide its practical engagement. In doing so, the prevalent notion of development underlying the discussion around religion and development is being put into question. The foundations of our faith inform what is called "development" and challenge an

overall concept according to which development is an absolute category. Instead, development is intertwined with and results from certain anthropological assumptions, value systems and interests that can be both secular and religious.



Photo: LWF/M. Renaux



A man nails on tin roofing in the Tamang village of Goljung, in the Rasuwa District of Nepal near the country's border with Tibet. Photo: LWF/Paul Jeffrey

The Ongoing Debate on Religion and Development

The renewed interest in religion

While nowadays discussing religion and partnering with FBOs seems to be en vogue within the development sector, this has not always been the case. For decades, religion, faith and spirituality were not seriously taken into account within the discourse as relevant contextual factors for development and humanitarian programs. One of the reason for this was the Western paradigm of secularization that evolved out of European Enlightenment thinking, according to which religion would eventually cease to exist or at least become a mere private matter that would no longer have any place in public life. Religion was considered backward looking while scientific progress and the secular implied civilization and progress.

With time, it became obvious that science and human rationality do not

necessarily lead to an everlasting peace, as some had expected; they, too, have the potential to be at odds with development and peace. In light of the HIV and AIDS crisis and the rise of violent religious extremism, the important role of religion became increasingly obvious. Not only at the political level, but also within the development sector, secular actors have started to accept religion as a highly significant given that cannot be ignored.

Religion has the potential to divide and to unite, to cause harm and to heal, to function as a major driver or major obstacle to development and peace. The focus of today's discourse has shifted to examining more closely how the positive potential of religion can be reinforced and on finding a way to overcome possible negatives.

Today's discourse focuses on two thematic areas:

- *Addressing religion as a cross-cutting issue and contextual factor in development:* What is the positive and/or negative connection between religion and development? How does the development agenda fit in with faith? How can local communities' religious and spiritual beliefs and practices be taken into careful consideration when carrying out humanitarian or development projects?
- *Addressing religious actors as partners in development:* What is the positive and/or negative role of religious leaders, religious communities and faith-based development organizations (so-called faith-based organizations, FBOs) in development processes? What are the distinct assets of FBOs and what distinguishes them from secular development

organizations? How and based on which criteria can international development agencies collaborate more closely and effectively with religious communities, leaders and FBOs?

Particular emphasis has been placed on the diverse contributions faith actors can make to peace, development and humanitarian aid. Closer partnerships with religious leaders, faith communities and FBOs are being pursued in order to strengthen and use religion's positive potential for development purposes.

In 2015, the member states of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) universally to “mobilize efforts to end all forms of poverty, fight inequalities and tackle climate change, while ensuring that no one is left behind.”² SDG 17 calls for more inclusive partnerships between governments, the private sector and civil society to share knowledge, expertise and other resources in order to achieve

the goals outlined in Agenda 2030. Since FBOs are considered to have the potential to enhance development effectiveness, partnerships with faith actors have become increasingly important.

New international partnerships

The renewed interest in religion and religious actors has resulted in various initiatives, networks, platforms, as well as innumerable events and publications on religion and development. One of the drivers has been the World Bank, which started to look more thoroughly at religion in the 1990s, ahead of most other international organizations. A major World Bank initiative, the so-called Moral Imperative, was launched in 2015. This multi-stakeholder platform brings together the World Bank, different UN entities and FBOs.

Within the United Nations system, the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Engaging Faith-Based Actors for Sustainable Development (UN IATF on Religion and Development) was

established in 2010. It endeavors to strengthen and coordinate the engagement of different UN bodies with FBOs. Another initiative that is meant to be driven by faith actors themselves is the so-called Joint Learning Initiative (JLI) on Faith and Local Communities. This international collaboration of different FBOs explores the role and contributions of faith groups to the development of local communities. Moreover, a new International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) was launched in 2016 in Berlin, bringing together government institutions from different countries, UN agencies, bilateral donor organizations and FBOs.

As active members of civil society, faith actors and their organizations can leverage significant social, physical and spiritual assets for the benefits of those UNHCR serves.³

UNHCR Partnership Note on Faith-Based Organizations, Local Faith Communities and Faith Leaders

Together with many other networks, think tanks and research programs these rather new initiatives are visible signs of the growing interest in FBOs and their distinct contribution and the resulting reorientation in the relationship between secular and faith actors in development.

Distinct assets of faith-based actors

It is often argued that FBOs bring “added value” to development and humanitarian aid. But what, in particular, do secular development agencies hope for when engaging more closely with faith actors? The main reason for seeking more closely to collaborate with religious actors, especially FBOs, are the distinct assets that are often attributed to them within the religion and development discourse:⁴

- *Religious literacy and expertise:* FBOs are considered to have a particular expertise, or so-called “religious literacy,” which enables them properly to address the role

of faith in overcoming suffering and promoting development. They have the potential to link their work to the Sacred Scriptures and religious traditions that have a long history of caring for people in need, overcoming injustice and promoting well-being.

- *Globally connected and locally rooted:* FBOs are often embedded in a global network and act as transnational civil society actors. At the same time, they are locally rooted due to their close connection to affiliated religious communities on the ground and therefore credited with cultural literacy and sensitivity to context. Both aspects help them to motivate and mobilize people at the grass roots, nationally and internationally.
- *Moral authority and credibility:* It is assumed that through a shared faith and religious values FBOs enjoy credibility and trust among local communities. They are thought to have the ability

to communicate in a way that relates to people’s faith identity and basic values when carrying out development programs and therefore are frequently not regarded as external development agencies, but as related ministries. As a result, it is assumed that they can act as bridge builders between secular international agencies and local religious communities.

- *Sustainability:* The close connection between FBOs and local faith communities promises continuity and sustainability; they may be the only actors present while NGOs, international organizations and governments come and go. FBOs are thought to be able more easily to build on local social structures such as churches, mosques or other religious institutions. This supports and sustains development initiatives, even after the specific project has come to an end.

Risks and challenges

The new discourse on religion and development entails (1) important steps toward more explicitly addressing religion as a crucial factor for social change, and (2) partnering more closely with FBOs as key actors in order more effectively to relate international development efforts to the faith and beliefs of local communities. This trend, however, has also brought with it some risks and challenges.

Even though various international agencies increasingly address the subject of religion in development, secular organizations, on the whole, lack religious literacy. Due to an only vague understanding of religion it remains unclear what is actually meant by “focusing on religion.” In many cases, an emphasis on religion is equated with a narrow focus on partnering with religious actors or, more particularly, FBOs.⁵ Thus, religion *per se* is not being addressed holistically as a contextual factor of development efforts, nor is sufficient attention being paid to the meaning and significance of religion and faith

beyond their direct relevance for development. Consequently, some FBOs fear that secular development agencies might merely instrumentalize them instead of more closely looking at what their faith identity actually involves beyond its purely functional advantages.

Furthermore, in terms of pursuing concrete partnerships, there is the issue of how to deal with the complexities and ambivalence of religion and faith actors. Against the backdrop of increasing religious extremism and radical tendencies across all faith traditions that undermine human rights, defining normative criteria for partnership remains challenging. Due to this complexity, many continue to shy away from the issue or partner exclusively with well-established and well-reputed FBOs .

Secular development actors are cautioned against either ignoring the role of religion (in which case the development agenda loses a valuable interlocutor),

or over-simplifying the complexities and ambiguities often found in such domains, particularly around contentious rights-related issues.⁶

Azza Karam, Senior Advisor on Culture at UNFPA and Coordinator of the UN IATF on Religion and Development

At the same time, the designation “FBO” has as yet not been clearly defined and thus continues to be unclear and problematic.⁷ The term “FBO” encompasses a vast diversity of organizations, which may express their respective faith bases quite differently and not possess all the distinct assets described above. In some environments, the distinction between FBOs and other NGOs might be artificial, if at all recognizable, such as for instance there where faith is inseparably intertwined with the life and work of the people; this clearly influences the value system and practices of any organization. The questions what makes FBOs a distinct group, different from other development actors, and what

kind of concrete “added value” they bring to development work, remains unanswered.

The very notion of “added value” is tricky as it implies that faith-based actors merely “add” something to a secular development sector. In light of the history of development work, however, this perspective is being challenged. Religious institutions and communities were engaged in development work and humanitarian assistance long before secular international organizations and global NGOs took up their work. In Europe, for instance, particularly churches and other diaconal actors have made significant contributions to the health sector. It is estimated that 30 to 40 percent (in humanitarian crises even up to 75 per cent) of health care services around the world are provided by faith-based actors today.⁸ Some argue that it would be more appropriate to speak of “core value” instead of “added value” and of “religions in development” instead of “religion and development” since historically faith actors constituted the very core of the development sector.

The notion of “core value” also points to the self-understanding of many FBOs, including the LWF. Christian faith is not an attractive “add-on” to the LWF’s work—it is at the very heart of the communion. This does not necessarily differentiate the LWF from any other international development agency or secular NGO, in the sense that every organization is grounded in a certain value system. Development itself cannot be regarded as an absolute concept or as having a neutral agenda since it is always guided by certain assumptions, values and interests. Because these foundations directly inform development efforts and impact people’s lives accordingly, it is crucial that all actors engaged in humanitarian and development work are transparent about their specific understanding of development and how this impacts their work.

[N]o intervention can be neutral but is always imbedded in existential and moral assumptions, which

therefore will—consciously or unconsciously—impact people’s religious convictions and practice. That is the case of any development work, whether secular or faith-based.⁹

Diakonia in Context

In the following chapter, we shall outline the value system and principles, rooted in the Lutheran faith identity, that inform our development work and define the LWF’s specific contribution to and role within the development sector. While the religion and development discourse principally looks at faith actors from the outside—sometimes with a quite narrow and functional perspective on religion—the following chapters offer an inside perspective that attempts to capture the “faith element” at the heart of the communion by exploring the theological foundation of the LWF engagement.



Two Lutheran pastors from Indonesia and Suriname at World Reformation Exhibition, Wittenberg, Germany, August 2017. Photo: LWF/Marco Schoeneberg

How Our Lutheran Identity Affects the LWF's Development Work

Faith in the Triune God, Christian anthropology and sustainable development

The Christian understanding of what it means to be human and a vision of life in fullness in communion with the Creator and the whole creation is the result of faith in the Triune God. This Christian anthropology shapes how we understand meaningful human development with its different dimensions: spiritual, social, physical, psychological, political and economic. Such an holistic understanding therefore forms the very basis of our engagement.

How Christian anthropology and Christian ethics are interpreted changes over time as can be seen, for example, in how gender relations and especially the place and agency of women are understood. Christians have become complicit in systems of oppression and domination, as for example in the slave trade, colonial

domination and economic exploitation. For the church, the call to transformation has repeatedly been a call to repentance and openness to a new beginning.

According to the Bible, human nature implies ambiguity: Every human being is created in the image of God, endowed with equal dignity and rights. According to Psalm 8, God “made them [human beings] a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor” (Ps 8:5). Christian anthropology teaches us not to think of human beings as atomized individuals, but rather as related beings. God has made us part of a system of mutual relationships and interdependence—with our Creator, with one another, and with the rest of creation. When God declares God’s creation to be “very good” (Gen 1:31) this is not confined to human beings, but includes all of God’s creation, which is supposed to

work together as an “interconnected living ecological system.”¹⁰ God has given human beings the responsibility for and ability to participate as stewards in sustaining and developing God’s creation.

The Bible also gives examples of human weakness and people’s potential to destroy themselves, each other and their environment. Human sin distorts and violates God’s creation. Peoples’ relationships with God, creation and one another are continually being disrupted. Through his life, death and resurrection Jesus Christ overcame the reign of sin and shared God’s grace as a free and unconditional gift.

Throughout his life, Jesus reached out particularly to those at the margins of society. At the same time, everyone he talked to—no matter whether rich or poor, respected or outcast—was in need of his transforming grace. Being transformed by

God's grace implies fullness. Jesus Christ came so that "they may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10). The people Jesus reached out to were never just cured from a disease or partly changed—through the encounter with God's liberating grace every aspect of their lives was fully transformed.

This theological perspective has implications for the basic assumptions underlying our engagement in development work. First, it leads to an holistic understanding of development as an act of transformation that is not confined to material aspects. Rather, transformation is "a continuous process of rejection of that which dehumanizes and desecrates life and adherence to that what affirms the sanctity of life and gifts in everyone and promotes peace and justice in society."¹¹ Development therefore aims at physical as well as psychological well-being, at material as well as spiritual needs.

Since the whole of creation is in need of God's transforming grace, development becomes a necessity not only for the materially deprived

but for all. One main determinant of this transforming process are relationships as the fundamental function in theological anthropology. There is no development without reconciliation and the restoration of relationships. This component goes beyond human relationships and demands that human beings face the ecological challenge by taking up their God-given mandate responsibly to care for God's creation.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Romans 12:2

God's engagement with the world as the theological foundation of our engagement

God loves the world and desires the well-being of all human beings.

God's ongoing engagement with the world forms the basis of our own engagement in the public sphere. In Jesus Christ's incarnation, God came into the world in the most profound way, reaching every dimension of human life: joy and suffering, hope and pain. Jesus came to serve, not to be served. Confident that we are reconciled with God through Jesus Christ, God's grace liberates us to care for others—not in order to obtain any merits before God as we are justified through grace and faith alone, but as the visible expression of the new life, which is given to us in Christ by faith. Martin Luther therefore concludes that:

[A] Christian does not live in himself, but in Christ, and in the neighbour, or else is no Christian; in Christ by faith, in the neighbour by love. By faith the person is carried upwards above himself to God, and by love he sinks back below himself to his neighbour.¹²

When looking more closely at Jesus' life, it becomes clear that his idea of

diakonia goes way beyond charitable efforts.¹³ Instead, it is an act of transformation, of liberation and reconciliation. Jesus healed and lifted up the rights of those who were “like sheep without a shepherd” (Mt 9:36). He particularly sided with those at the margins of society by affirming and defending their human dignity and rights, establishing and restoring relationships, and empowering them to participate in his holistic mission. Our engagement in development is therefore not directed by the math of the most influential majorities, but by the needs of the most vulnerable.

Being liberated by God’s grace to love and serve the neighbors implies declaring one’s solidarity with the disadvantaged in society. The Christian witness in the public space is guided primarily by assessing the consequences of political decisions for the most disadvantaged in society.¹⁴

The Church in the Public Space

The Reformation took up these transforming elements and brought a renewed vision of transformation and justice in society. Diaconal action, including international development work, implies looking for ways in which transformation can take place. It is therefore part of the intrinsic nature of any diaconal action to unmask systemic forms of injustice and to promote justice and human rights. The aim is to create a public space as a just space for all, giving each person equal access to common goods and political decision making, in safety, and in which meaningful participation and interaction among all groups in society is possible.¹⁵ International diakonia therefore includes immediate action to alleviate human suffering as well as long-term action and advocacy that targets the root causes of this suffering.

This endeavor aspires to help and uphold the rights of those who traditionally have been disadvantaged and excluded from the public sphere. It is important to note that diakonia is never only for but always with others. According to our Chris-

tian understanding of humanity, we all need God’s transforming grace. Development is therefore much more than “us” helping “them.” It is an act that takes place within a framework of mutuality and equality. As the grace of God is a free gift for all, our engagement can never be tied to any conditions or criteria or serve another purpose than what it basically is: serving and being with our neighbor in need.

We all need to be transformed, reconciled and empowered. For that reason, we are all in need of diakonia, first of all of God’s diakonia as revealed in Jesus Christ, and then as mutual care and accompaniment of one another.¹⁶

Diakonia in Context

The LWF’s role within and beyond Agenda 2030

We are called to transform structures and systems, communities and rela-

tionships, others and ourselves. In this regard, Agenda 2030, with its overall aim to “transform our world,” constitutes a milestone in international development cooperation since it aspires to sustainable development following a similar holistic approach.

The SDGs go further than their predecessors, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as they challenge all countries—rich, middle-income and poor—jointly to work towards fulfilling the goals. Moreover, the SDGs are not simply about ending poverty. They are also about fighting all forms of discrimination (which relates to human relationships) while, at the same time, protecting the planet (which relates to the relationship between human beings and their ecological environment). The overall principle of “leaving no one behind” connects human beings and society with different policy areas and is very much in line with the LWF’s goal to prioritize the needs of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable. The LWF therefore calls upon and supports member churches “to intensify their education and work on the SDGs, de-

velop concrete programs, to work on achieving the SDGs in their respective countries and engage governments and national or local organizations for implementation of SDGs.”¹⁷

At the same time, there is an ongoing debate around what kind of and whose development should be pursued. There is certainly a consensus that development should be sustainable in the sense that it is “a process of change by which the basic needs and human rights of individuals and communities in any given society are realized while at the same time protecting the basic needs and human rights of other communities and future generations.”¹⁸ How this should be achieved and what it should look like in more detail remains open to debate.

Development is always informed by certain assumptions and value systems. Looking at Agenda 2030, it remains unclear which understanding of development forms the ultimate basis of the SDGs. Certain elements, however, imply that the main focus still lies on (economic) growth. For instance, there is a clear emphasis

on promoting multi-stakeholder partnerships, which, in principle, is crucial for increasing the effectiveness of development. Yet, besides governments and civil society actors, SDG 17 on partnerships specifically points to the need more closely to involve the private sector. From the LWF’s perspective, this entails the risk that the focus shifts from the most disadvantaged in society to economic interests dominating development efforts toward economic growth and profit. Such a notion imposes an economic paradigm that impacts the whole creation—human beings and nature—in a way opposed to the LWF’s understanding of development.

Our transformative approach goes beyond a notion of development based on economic growth: It is not about *having* but about *being*—being embedded in healthy relationships and communities; being empowered to act as subjects of one’s own development and as co-creators with God in sustaining God’s creation; being liberated by God’s grace and with equal rights to fulfill our God-given potential.

Based on this understanding of development, existing power structures must be challenged as soon as they cause social injustices and harm the most disadvantaged in society. Therefore, human rights constitute a crucial normative framework for the LWF, which goes hand in hand with its theological foundations. From our perspective, Agenda 2030 falls short of addressing polarization, structural injustices and fundamental underlying power dynamics as obstacles to development and peace. The notion of development that constitutes the basis of the SDGs seems

to move within existing power structures instead of challenging them.

Nonetheless, we gladly add weight to Agenda 2030 and the SDGs while continuing to question those of its assumptions that do not uphold the rights of the most vulnerable. Following such an approach, our engagement is a two-way street, in which we do not only share, but also receive and learn by being challenged and questioned.

It is the participation in the public space under the sign of the cross.

Never engaging with hegemonic pretensions, avoiding all theocratic tendencies, aware of the own ambivalence of both believers and the churches, yet joyfully bringing those treasures to the table, which we recognize because of our faith in the Triune God.¹⁹

Martin Junge, General Secretary of the LWF

The ABCDE of our engagement

The following ABCDE of our engagement is deeply rooted in our Christian anthropology and is the practical result of our Christian core values.²⁰ It provides the framework within which the LWF's humanitarian and development programs, advocacy activities and theological work takes place.

Assessing issues in participatory ways

In its work the LWF assesses issues in participatory ways and critically analyses power structures. Before carrying out any development or advocacy project, the issue at stake must be understood and therefore carefully examined. This includes reading the context by drawing on field research, raising questions and clearly spelling out assumptions. The needs and interests of different stakeholders, including our own, must be identified and the power structures involved scrutinized. Power dynamics that obstruct participation must be overcome and participatory assessment reinforced. It is crucial to listen to those directly affected and deliberately to include voices that tend to be excluded and neglected, particularly those of women and youth. While it is important to take the local communities' religious and cultural worldviews into consideration, it is crucial that we remain transparent about our own Christian identity, value system and guiding principles.

→ In Colombia, LWF World Service works with communities to build a peaceful and just society in the wake of the long civil war in the country. Access to land is a key issue, and is influenced by local power dynamics, national level policies and international business interests. Based on a careful analysis, the LWF works at all levels—local to global—for the rights of those communities, and at the same time influences national and international practice. In this, the voice of the local people, especially women and youth, is the most important factor. Positioning ourselves in solidarity with them is the key perspective.



In Colombia, LWF World Service takes into account local voices, especially those of women and youth. Photo: LWF Colombia



Students of the LWF interfaith youth training visiting the Parmalim community, a local religious tradition, in Medan, Indonesia. Photo: A. Yaqin

Building relationships of trust

In its work the LWF is community-based and strives to build relationships of trust, locally and globally.

This ability to build trust with communities and therefore be an effective and trusted actor is recognized by the international community:

*You go where others don't go. You are right there with us.*²¹

George Okoth-Obbo, 2014, Africa Director of UNHCR

Conflict situations haunt many communities. We feel called to walk the road of peace and reconciliation by building relationships of trust—with and among the people targeted by the LWF's development efforts as well as its partners and other stakeholders in society. These relationships go beyond external or internal boundaries as differences express the richness of God's creation. The LWF is called to work together with other actors in society, including other religious communities. Relationships of trust imply equality and the need to be (self) critical toward political and cultural power structures that create hierarchical understandings of humanity that run counter to our Christian anthropology. Particularly there where these structures are religiously constructed, we

are responsible for deconstructing unhealthy theologies by promoting a life-giving and fruitful theology that allows human beings to restore healthy relationships based on mutual acceptance and solidarity. Accountability forms the basis of the LWF's engagement with local communities and partners, as well as other stakeholders in society: It is important to be mutually responsible by justifying our own decisions and actions, and ensuring that agreed action is taken.

➔ The LWF has built relationships of trust among religious communities, and brought together people of different faiths to deepen mutual understanding and a joint commitment to issues of shared concern. One example is an interfaith youth training in Indonesia, which was jointly planned and carried out by the LWF and local partners in 2016. The initiative promoted religious diversity and equality for all by informing an interreligious group of young people on the rights of minorities and the right to freedom of religion and belief in constructive local interfaith encounters.

Challenging injustice

In its work the LWF follows a human rights based approach. God has endowed every human being with equal dignity, irrespective of social status, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, ability, or other differences. In the midst of these complexities, we unequivocally raise our voice when people's dignity is violated and basic human rights are infringed upon. The LWF's mission reaches beyond alleviating immediate suffering. Our commitment to human rights implies that we advocate for the marginalized and excluded, in order to transform oppressive structures and destructive systems. The life of Jesus Christ provides a vantage point for challenging policies and practices that run counter to God's intention. As Christians, we are called to engage in politics—not for the sake of power, but for the sake of empowering those who suffer injustice and for the more equitable distribution of power, resources and opportunities within a public sphere that is just for all.

→ For the LWF, climate change is a question of justice, peace, the care for creation and human rights. It is also a question of justice between people, nations and generations. LWF Youth has been particularly involved in climate change advocacy, by highlighting the need for sustainability and ecological justice in different fora. For instance, a delegation of young people participates in the UN Climate Conferences each year, and raises a faith-based voice for climate justice.



A Fast for the Climate event during COP20 in Lima, Peru. Photo: LWF/Sean Hawkey



Holy Communion during the Global Commemoration of the Reformation, 14 May 2017, Windhoek, Namibia. Photo: LWF/Johan Celine Valeriano

Discovering signs of hope

In its work the LWF is people-centered and strives to enable human beings to realize their full potential. An holistic approach to development goes beyond targeting immediate physical and material needs. The call for transformation suggests taking into account the whole human being, including his/her spiritual needs when carrying out development and humanitarian programs. Faith, spirituality and religion are integral parts of our overall understanding of human life. In the environments in which the LWF operates, especially in post-conflict situations, faith is often the only sign of hope that people can hold on to. It is therefore important to have the competence to deal with this spiritual dimension and professionally to respond to spiritual needs as an integral part of humanitarian and development efforts. This requires a clear understanding of the role of religion—both its strengths and weaknesses—and how to mobilize religious mindsets and values for transformation toward a more just and sustainable society.

→ Taking account of religious and spiritual needs is particularly important in settings where faith is the only sign of hope that people can hold on to. This is often the case for refugees, displaced persons and those affected by humanitarian crises in general. In close collaboration with Islamic Relief Worldwide, supported by other FBOs and the UNHCR, the LWF has developed guidelines for faith-sensitive humanitarian response. Through a process of inter-agency consultation and partnership, these guidelines are currently being piloted and refined with the goal of supporting the implementation of more a faith-sensitive humanitarian response globally.

Empowering people at the margins

In its work the LWF shows solidarity with the disadvantaged and marginalized in society. Based on God's justice and grace for all, we seek to transform power relations at the structural level and to strengthen individual agency. People must be empowered in order to act as subjects for their own development, and to participate in a public space that is just for all. Local capacities and contributions need to be taken into account when carrying out development and humanitarian programs in order to ensure the sustainability of our work.

→ In 2012, the LWF established a country program in Jordan to respond to the needs of refugees and host communities. The program targets the most vulnerable Syrian refugees and Jordanian host communities, and strives to enable and empower them to regain control over their own lives. One example is the cash program that is based on the conviction that beneficiaries are able to decide for themselves what their most pressing needs are and should therefore have the right to spend the money accordingly. This approach reinforces their agency and helps them at least to get back basic control over their daily lives.



A number of young refugees, including a child with Down syndrome, at Za'atari camp. LWF assistance is prioritizing children with special needs as well as adults with disabilities. Photo: LWF/R. Schlott

Looking Ahead

The current discourse on religion and development principally gives an outside perspective on faith actors, their distinct assets, as well as the advantages of a closer collaboration with FBOs. This has generated new opportunities for FBOs to be recognized by and engaged more closely with international development agencies. At the same time, however, the discourse risks of following a functional—sometimes even instrumentalist—approach to religion and to partnering with faith actors. The aim of this brochure is to widen this focus by offering an inside contribution to the religion and development debate. This was done by elaborating on what the “faith element” within the LWF constitutes and entails: It is no add-on, but at the very heart of the communion. It is the basis that informs our values and understanding of development as an act of transformation.

As religion can be both hindrance and help to development, it is crucial

that we are transparent about our faith basis, resulting value system and how this influences our work within the humanitarian and development sector. Yet, no intervention is neutral. Every development effort builds upon and is informed by certain anthropological assumptions and values. This is the case for both faith-based and secular development agencies.

Even though Agenda 2030 constitutes a milestone by expanding traditional development cooperation to include a broader range of issues and actors, the debate continues on what kind of and whose development is being pursued. In order to ensure transparency and accountability, it is therefore vital that all actors involved in this agenda disclose their specific anthropological assumptions, resulting value systems and interests. In this brochure, we have made an effort to do so by further clarifying the LWF’s theological rationale and commitment to values.

The debate on religion and development boils down to the question of how to increase development effectiveness by looking more closely at matters of faith and faith actors as partners in development cooperation. In this respect, the LWF considers four areas of action as particularly important:

- *Learning from each other:* There is the immediate need to promote religious literacy among professional development workers, and development literacy among religious communities. Through capacity building activities, for instance within the LWF “Waking the Giant” program, we aim to bolster development literacy among our member churches so as to enable them to engage more professionally in development efforts, using the professional standards and tools that are available within the sector. At the same time, religious literacy

needs to be further developed among development professionals, both within secular agencies and FBOs. For instance, together with ACT Alliance the LWF currently works on developing a new online course on religion and development for ACT Members.

- *Building stronger partnerships:* Following Agenda 2030, the LWF strives to collaborate more closely with other actors in its humanitarian and development endeavors. We seek to establish and deepen partnerships with

international organizations such as UN agencies and other civil society actors, both secular and faith-based. The LWF particularly seeks to cooperate with interreligious partners as a crucial step in moving towards more holistic and sustainable development.

- *Enhancing theological capacity:* The LWF fosters close relationships to theological seminaries, faculties and institutions. It recognizes the importance of theological education and of constructively and (self)critically

engaging with faith teaching and practice and promotes a life-giving theology as outlined in this document.

- *Continue doing:* The most visible reflection of the LWF's work around "religion and development" is its humanitarian and development engagement. This practice, based on principal values firmly rooted in the Christian faith, is in itself an articulation of our Lutheran perspective.

The LWF's Work on Religion and Development: An Overview

Since 1947 the LWF has been involved in implementing humanitarian response and development programs on all continents through its humanitarian arm, World Service. In 2012 the LWF started a program on religion and development in order to contribute to the international discourse.

- 2012: Launch of the LWF Religion and Development program in the Department for Theology and Public Witness
- 2012: Global conference on religion and development attended by over 70 academics, heads of churches, development practitioners and agencies, organized by the LWF in collaboration with Mission EineWelt in Neuendettelsau, Germany
- 2012–2015: Pilot project and regional workshops with three Lutheran churches in Kenya, Namibia and Zimbabwe, with the aim of reinforcing the churches' capacity effectively to participate in development
- 2013: Publication of the book, *Religion: Help or Hindrance to Development?* edited by Kenneth Mtata
- 2014: Global consultation on religion and development in Berlin, co-organized with Bread for the World, attended by over 50 international experts from Christian development organizations and churches, as well as practitioners in development cooperation, researchers, policy makers and key representatives from government agencies
- 2015: Establishment of the ACT Community of Practice (CoP) on Religion and Development, cochaired by the LWF and Bread for the World
- 2016: Workshop on the role of religious communities in peacebuilding in Zimbabwe
- 2016: Publication of the LWF Council Statement and related Study Document on *The Church in the Public Space*, which affirms the public role and responsibility of religious communities to enhance justice and peace
- 2017: Establishment of the Ecumenical Task Force on Religion and Development between the LWF, WCC and ACT Alliance jointly to develop an inter-agency strategy paper on religion and development
- 2017: Development of the “Waking the Giant” program in the Department for Mission and Development that aims at strengthening the churches' capacity effectively to contribute to the achievement of Agenda 2030 and the SDGs
- 2017: Workshops on “Religion and Development,” on “Religion and Peace” on “Introduction to the UN SDGs” at the LWF Twelfth Assembly in Windhoek, Namibia



Lalibela, in Afar region, Ethiopia, May 2016.
Photo: Magnus Aronson

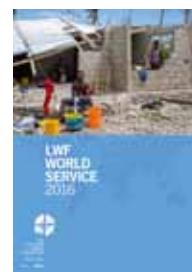
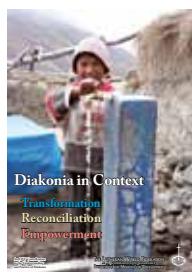
Endnotes

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- ⁷ Nordstokke, op. cit. (note 4), 231.
- ⁸ Karam, op. cit. (note 6), x.
- ⁹ The Lutheran World Federation, *Diakonia in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2009), www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DMD-Diakonia-EN-low.pdf, 85.
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- ¹² *Diakonia in Context*, op. cit. (note 9), 36.
- ¹³ For a closer elaboration on what the LWF understands as diakonia, see *Diakonia in Context*, op. cit. (note 9).
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Liberated by God's grace, a
communion in Christ living
and working together for a just,
peaceful, and reconciled world.



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