

# The Church in the Public Space

## A Statement of the Lutheran World Federation

*This Public Statement was adopted by the Council of the Lutheran World Federation at its meeting in Wittenberg, Germany, June 2016.*

### 1. Lutherans affirm the call to public engagement

On the occasion of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation, the Lutheran communion seeks to claim the church's public engagement as a vital element of what it means to be Lutheran. Public engagement is the church's ongoing response to the freedom that is ours in Christ to love and serve the neighbor. The Reformation clearly expressed that this freedom emerges from the salvation by grace through faith.

At a time in which the role and authority of religion is debated, we articulate why and how as Lutherans we are present and active in the public space. As we look toward the future as a global communion, we respond to the call to a more profound presence in the public space.

Christians are shaped by the gospel message. God's liberating power transforms us to live a life that reflects the good news of Jesus Christ. In Christ God embraces our fragility, suffering and sin and brings human existence into new life (Phil 2). Baptism is the anchor for Christian life and Christian public engagement. The Bible calls us to be ready to respond to anyone who demands us to account for the hope that is within us; and to do so with gentleness and reverence (1 Pet 3:15f). Baptism implies a vocation to a life in faith, hope and love (1 Cor 13:13), ready to care for the well-being of all.

Christian communities have a public dimension, as they are called by God to be transformative agents in the world (Rom 12:2). Churches and congregations are called to move beyond their institutional comfort zone and prophetically to dwell amidst the cries and hopes that fill their local and global contexts. Thus, when churches isolate themselves from the broader concerns of their societies they betray their calling to be salt and light to the world (Mt 5:13–16).

### 2. Lutherans are committed to strengthening public space as a just place for all

We envision public space as a just place for all and affirm our commitment actively to contribute to such a space. Three important elements characterize public space as a just place for all: (a) equal access to common goods and political decision-making processes; (b) safety, especially for the vulnerable; and (c) meaningful participation of and interaction among all groups of society.

Social empowerment takes place when groups, traditionally excluded from social, political and economic processes, make their voices heard and have their claims publicly addressed and therefore are able to contribute to the development of public policies and cultural transformation.

### 3. Lutherans affirm the public role and responsibility of religious communities

Against tendencies to limit religion to the private realm and to withdraw into enclosed communal spaces, we affirm that religious communities have a public role in society. They actively contribute to the common good by sharing their spiritual visions and values, articulating their understanding of a just and peaceful society, advocating against oppressive structures and serving people in need.

Such a public role entails the responsibility to order one's affairs in accountable and transparent ways, both in institutional matters and in matters of theological teaching. Lutherans are acutely aware of human fallibility and sin, also within the church. Because of this the church cannot claim a

superior position in the public discourse. The gospel word brings life to the world and the church is an instrument through which the gospel is heard. Therefore, the church is called to engage critically and self-critically in this world.

### 4. Lutherans emphasize the distinction between the worldly and the spiritual realms

When claiming active presence in the public space, it is helpful to distinguish between the worldly and the spiritual realms. According to Lutheran theology, in the worldly realm, laws are used to order society so that all people may live together in peace. At the heart of the spiritual realm stands the sharing of the good news of God's deep love for this world. Proclaiming God's mercy is an essential mark of our church and one of our contributions to the public space.

Lutherans advocate against the politicization of religion and the instrumentalization of politics by religious actors. Such dynamics distort the meaning and function of both realms, and become destructive for the whole of society. The church's task is not to dominate the public space but, rather, to warn against any worldview or religion, Christian or other, becoming an ideology that would dominate the public space. Lutherans underline the importance of freedom of religion or belief as a means to protect the spiritual realm in people's lives from undue interference. Lutherans condemn any violence, domestic or public, and any hate speech perpetrated in the name of religion.

### 5. Lutherans acknowledge the public space as a shared space

In their societies, Lutherans live together with people of other religious traditions and convictions. Dialogue and cooperation are essential in order to create a participatory public space. As conflict stalks many societies, the church is called to walk the way of peace together with others and to build relationships of trust. The church is called to lead and serve processes of repentance, healing and forgiveness and jointly to walk new ways towards reconciliation. The church is actively involved in shaping a vibrant civil society and being part of networks of solidarity.

### 6. Lutherans affirm human rights as an important tool to enhance justice and peace

The Christian witness in the public space is primarily guided by assessing the consequences of political decisions for the most disadvantaged in society. As creatures of God, all human beings are created with equal dignity. Therefore the church is called to reevaluate cultural distinctions between center and margin, between powerful and oppressed, between low and high. In a plural and globalized world, human rights have become an important tool to enhance justice and peace.

### 7. Lutherans are committed to five key activities in public space:

- (a) Assessing public issues in participatory ways
- (b) Building relationships of trust
- (c) Challenging injustice
- (d) Discovering signs of hope
- (e) Empowering people in need.

## The ABCDE of the Church's Engagement in the Public Space

### A

#### Assessing public issues in participatory ways



As many issues of public concern are quite complex and involve many actors, there is a need to carefully examine the issue in order to understand what is at stake. This includes listening to those affected by the issue and drawing on research in the field. In such discernment processes the needs and interests of different stakeholders need to be identified and the power structures involved carefully scrutinized. The church needs to be clear about its own relation to the matter at stake and seek ways to strengthen participatory assessment.

### B

#### Building relationships of trust



Conflict situations haunt many communities in this world. The church is called to walk in the ways of peace with other actors in society and build relationships of trust. The church offers space for honestly dealing with the divisive realities. The church is called to lead and serve processes of repentance, healing and forgiveness and jointly to walk new ways toward reconciliation. The church invites to mutual accountability and responsibility and is actively involved in invigorating a vibrant civil society, and being part of networks of solidarity.

### C

#### Challenging injustice



In the midst of complexities, the church unequivocally raises a prophetic voice when people's dignity is violated and basic human rights are infringed upon. At times the church can use established procedures to advocate for the marginalized and excluded, at others it needs to find creative and extraordinary ways to address injustice. The gospel entails a clear vision of transforming oppressive structures and destructive systems. Christians are called to engage in politics, not for the sake of power, but for the sake of empowering those who suffer injustice. The church promotes the rule of law and good governance as highly important structural conditions for enabling justice and peace in society.

### D

#### Discovering signs of hope



The church is a place that invites people to discover signs of hope and connect with God's deep love for this world. The church accompanies people on their spiritual journey as they, nurtured by God's Word, breathe hope through God's Spirit. The church connects with initiatives that radiate hope in society by opening up new possibilities there where people found themselves lost or hopeless. Pastoral care, diaconal initiatives and public engagement envisage alternative options there where people felt they were suffocating in destructive dynamics. Sharing hope is an important dimension of the church's public engagement.

### E

#### Empowering people in need



The church is committed to strengthening people's agency so that they can live out their full potential in life. The gospel entails the vision that all obstacles that hinder people from fully participating in society be removed (Lk 4:18f.) The church is present with people in their suffering and listens to their plight. The church looks for ways to empower the weak and vulnerable through diaconal presence, education, advocacy and sometimes resistance movements. The church rejoices with people as they experience liberation and healing, as they find justice and peace and enjoy their dignity.



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