



THE
LUTHERAN
WORLD
FEDERATION

Department for Planning
and Operations

lutheranworld.org

In Christ, all things hold together

LWF PRESIDENT'S OPENING ADDRESS

June 2022

GENEVA, Switzerland

Greeting

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ. It is my great pleasure and privilege to welcome you to our 2022 Council meeting in Geneva, the first in-person meeting in three years and our last full meeting before the Thirteenth Assembly of The Lutheran World Federation next year. I bring you fraternal greetings from the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria (LCCN), my pastoral jurisdiction, and from my wife, Ruth.

We give thanks to God, who has called us to serve his church through the communion of Lutheran churches worldwide. We pray for God's guidance and healing in the world and especially for those who have suffered because of the COVID-19 pandemic and because of conflict and war in our world. Let us also remember the church leaders and church members who lost their lives to the pandemic. May God hear our prayers. Amen.

Let me begin by thanking all of you for your willingness to serve the LWF communion of churches and for the great flexibility you have all shown in the past years, especially taking important decisions online, because of travel restrictions. Your work is a blessing for the communion and for that, I am deeply grateful.

My appreciation also goes to staff at the Communion Office under the leadership of General Secretary Rev. Anne Burghardt. Their deep commitment in working for the church and for the world does not go unnoticed. I also want to note that this is General Secretary Burghardt's first in-person Council meeting. We have met many times online, but it is good to be together as we discern the journey of the communion of Lutheran churches.

“In Christ, all things hold together”

We gather for our meeting under the theme “In Christ, all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17). This theme reflects the theme of our Assembly next year- “One Body, One Spirit, One Hope;” and when read in its context of the first chapter of Colossians, reminds us how reconciliation, re-integration, diversity, and mutual inter-dependency are intrinsically linked to salvation,

This chapter is part of a hymn, which is known as the hymn of the Cosmic Christ. It reminds us that creation, justification, and reconciliation are the work of the Holy Trinity, and therefore in Christ, all things were created to live in a communion of reconciled diversity. The social and biological diversity of our planet reflects God's wisdom woven into the fabric of creation, where all parts of the oikoumene (economy, society, ecology) are meant to hold together in one life-sustaining body. Our temptation to turn in upon ourselves leads to climate change that disintegrates local ecosystems; ethno-nationalism and cultural supremacy that threaten the social diversity and the vibrancy of political bodies; economic forces that commodify beings and uproot them from the land and relationships that give them meaning and true value. In the face of all that would create division among God's good creation, Colossians reminds us of the cosmic nature of our confession of what it means to be justified by the faith of Christ. Where our sin and brokenness disintegrate life, God reconciles all creation in Christ Jesus. In the words of the apostle Paul, in 2 Corinthians 5:18; this ministry of reconciliation is given to the Church in which the Holy Spirit nurtures and sustains us in this task. Our communion of diverse Christians, reconciled to one another by a common confession, One Body and One Spirit becomes a sign of the One hope that we proclaim to all creation through our words and deeds.

Being mindful of this is key to our preaching the gospel for our times. In Christ, held together, is the centrality of our Christian faith. As we struggle to move from living under a global pandemic in search for a “new normal,” struggling to adjust to a new reality, the theme further reminds us of Christ, the normal that was before Coronavirus and the unchanging normal post coronavirus. Living in a world in turmoil that seems out of control, the theme, calls us back to the unchanging truth, Jesus Christ in whom all things hold together. The sad violence in many parts of the world, including my country of Nigeria, in recent years is enough cause for despair. But as a communion of pilgrims traveling through endless chaos, we have hope in the one who is the Center. And we also know, we are a communion held together not for the sake of ourselves only but for the sake of the world.

The times in which we live

The vision statement of the LWF describes how we want to work together as a communion and influence the world in which we live: “Liberated by God's Grace, a communion in Christ, living and working together for a just, peaceful, and reconciled world.”

Across the world there is great need for this: for justice, peace, reconciliation. In late February the Russian military invaded Ukraine. Millions of refugees have been on the move, mostly women and children as is always the case. They have been well received by neighboring countries and here I want to specially mention the LWF member churches in the countries neighboring Ukraine. Thank you for your quick mobilization and for your good work. I also want to offer my gratitude to the leadership of General Secretary Burghardt and the Communion Office for responding quickly, organizing a comprehensive response to meet basic needs and offer tangible support.

This is what it means in practice to work for justice, peace, and reconciliation. Last month the LWF opened an office in Warsaw to coordinate the response and it has since then opened distribution sites in collaboration with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), our member churches and other partners. The LWF and its member churches play a vital role in calling for peace and meeting the urgent and as well long-term needs of people.

As the communion of churches, we are unequivocal in our call for justice and peace as well as our call to serve people in need and welcome the stranger. One of the core vocations of the LWF when it was founded 75 years ago was to serve the needy. It continues to be so. This is who we are.

The war in Ukraine threatens peace in Europe and affects the whole world. This is the most visible of conflicts and wars in our world today, but it is not the only one. To name a few, conflicts also affect the people of Central America, Colombia, and Haiti; of Burundi, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, and Uganda; Israel-Palestine, Iraq, and Jordan; Nepal and Myanmar. This may look like a long list, but it is not complete.

It is estimated that conflict in 39 countries across the globe is a main driver behind record levels of food insecurity. In many of these countries the LWF and its member churches are providing support. Here, I want to highlight the work of LWF World Service, which is an expression of the joint calling of the LWF member churches, to serve people in need and work for hope and a future.

On May 22, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reported that a new high point of 100 million refugees and internally displaced people has been reached. For comparison, this is twice as many as were on the move after World War II, when the LWF was founded. It is the highest number on record so far and it is a milestone that the world must collectively roll back.

A year of transition

The year 2021 was a year of transition for the LWF. In June we elected our new General Secretary, Estonian pastor Rev. Anne Burghardt who took over from the former General Secretary Rev. Dr Martin Junge. We did this online after much discernment and we are very grateful that it was a smooth and efficient process. Again, I want to reiterate my gratitude to the members of the Council and the Communion Office staff and partners that accompanied us in the process.

The handover and transition process were equally quite smooth. I think that is both a testament to how well the LWF is run and the good qualities and leadership of our former and current general secretaries.

Let me here share the joy of us coming together in person after almost three years of online meetings. This for me re-echoes the words of the Psalmist, "How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity! (Ps 133:1). It has certainly not been easy for all of us and the member churches we serve. Sometimes we are not able to all be joining the meetings due to network or other communication challenges. I am deeply grateful that despite all the challenges of working online during these difficult times, we have successfully fulfilled our responsibility as Council. This would not have been possible without your resilience and commitment as Council members, Communion staff under the leadership of our former General Secretary Rev. Dr. Martin Junge and now Rev. Anne Burghardt. It also demonstrates the commitment of the member

churches to stand together in times when many people find it easy to walk away from one another. I am particularly grateful and proud of our communion staff for the capacity to hold on the fort and ensure the implementation of key projects and programs including accompaniment of member churches that engage in prophetic ministry in these times of global crisis due to the pandemic.

Dear friends, as I mentioned earlier, this meeting is the last regular LWF Council meeting before the 13th Assembly. I should therefore like to take the opportunity to thank you again for your readiness to serve our communion in these difficult times. For about three years of our seven-year tenure, we could not meet in person. It has never happened like this before in the history of the Lutheran World Federation, that governance had to function virtually. In a way, we have made history as the first Council that had to go virtual, yet able to hold the communion together. Again, this would not have been possible without mutual confidence and trust on one another. As president, I am so grateful for your understanding, commitment, and mutual support, always finding ways to make things happen, to ensure that LWF and its work with member churches and response to human need are on course.

Our capacity to faithfully maintain that course is deeply rooted in our Lutheran tradition that confesses Christ crucified, as the promise of the Triune God who is present even in the shadows. A theology of the cross is just one of the theological commitments that shape what it means to be Lutheran and equip us for times such as these. We are grateful for those youth, theologians, church leaders, practitioners and thousands among our parishes who have participated in the Lutheran Identities Study Process. Their participation has affirmed the importance of the Bible, the Augsburg confessions, catechism, and the shape of our liturgy in Word and Sacrament revealing the real presence of Christ as the center, the one who identifies us. And, we have heard how the One Spirit, that is the source of unity, equips us to engage in bold ecumenical, interfaith, intercultural and interdisciplinary dialogue and transformational ministry in the world. Ours is a living tradition that forms, reforms and equips each generation of the baptized in increasingly diverse contexts. In addition to the local projects, printed and online resources, we look forward to receiving a Study Document to encourage our members to return to the source and center of our faith, to be liberated by the grace of the One who identifies us, and calls us to life in communion with one another and the world that God has made.

We are grateful to the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Poland (ECACP) for hosting our great Assembly. This is an enormous responsibility on behalf of us all, despite being a minority church. This reminds us that life in the communion is not about how big or small is a member church, but about being in communion - where no church is too small and none is too large. As one of my predecessors Bishop Josiah Kibira of Tanzania once said, as he laid out a vision for the LWF:

"There is no church, so big and so rich, that it wouldn't depend on the gifts of others; there is no church so small and so poor it wouldn't be able to enrich others."

We look forward with joy and gratitude for the opportunity to experience the gifts and hospitality of our host church. Meanwhile, we give thanks to God for the church's openness to the ministry of women by the first ordination of women into the pastoral ministry in Poland this May, when 9 women were ordained to serve as pastors in congregations across the country. On that occasion, the LWF Vice-President for Central Eastern Archbishop Urmas Viilma said: "The whole Lutheran communion celebrates and rejoices with you today!" Indeed, we did. The full inclusion of women in the ordained

ministry has been our goal for six consecutive Assemblies and we rejoice over every step taken forward. We also share the joy of the vibrant global young reformers who have made peace their theme this year. By bringing together innovative young leaders from across the world they make a difference, and they inspire churches all over the world. In the beginning of June, there was a training of peace messengers here in Geneva. Young leaders from LWF member churches, with passion for peace, ideas and motivation to implement local peace projects, came together to learn and be equipped for service in the church and in the world. We cannot wait to see the results!

Dear members of the Council. This being our last full meeting in-person before we gather in Krakow just over a year from now, I look forward to be with you there as the whole communion gathers to reflect together on what it means to be Lutheran today and how we are called to be "One Body, One Spirit, One Hope." The Assembly is the deepest / purest expression being together in communion. We will meet there to learn from each other, reflect jointly on the participation of the churches in God's mission and to give direction to our shared witness and service for the church and for the world, as a communion.

Closing

"In Christ, all things hold together."

Sisters and brothers, let us give thanks to God, who has called us to this meeting as the Council of the LWF. We come from different parts of the world, sent by our churches that are witnessing vibrantly to the Gospel, sent with our unique knowledge and insights, which we offer as gifts to the communion.

We are held together in Christ, who calls us; we are sent by him to preach the Gospel to all who have ears and to serve all who are in need. Sent to serve the wounded, the marginalized, the depressed, those without hope.

May God guide us during this meeting, as we carry out our responsibilities. Thank you again for your commitment and willingness to serve on the LWF's Council. May God guide our deliberations and fellowship and as we work for the communion and ultimately for his glory.

Amen.

Archbishop Dr Panti Filibus Musa
LWF President