



LIBERATED
BY GOD'S
GRACE

TWELFTH ASSEMBLY
THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION
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“LIBERATED BY GOD’S GRACE” Assembly Report

Liberated by God's Grace – Keynote Address

Dr Denis Mukwege

President of the Lutheran World Federation,
Pastors,
Your excellencies,
Sisters and brothers in Christ,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great privilege for me to give this address on the occasion of your Twelfth Assembly. I am very grateful for this invitation which I feel far from deserving, but that is a result of God's grace given to me. That grace is only effective when we release it to contribute to regarding and treating human beings as being in the image and likeness of God—in short, when we give their dignity to human beings, to women.

I feel at home among you. In fact, we share many things together. There are among you pastors, the sons and daughters of pastors, laypeople and humanitarian workers. I am a bit of all that at once.

The history of my commitment to those who have no voice begins with my family history. As a pastor's son, I used to go with my father on his visits to the sick and one day I asked him, "Papa, you pray with the sick, but why don't you give them medicines?"

My father replied, "Because I am not a doctor."

That day my vocation was born. I thus studied pediatric medicine so as to play a part in the eradication of infant mortality. During my first year of medical practice, I was dismayed to discover the very high death rate among mothers.

So I moved over to gynecology with the aim of fighting this terrible problem. After studying in France, I returned to the Congo and some years later, in 1996, the war broke out there.

That first war produced a new form of pathology in the Democratic Republic of Congo: rape in an extremely violent form.

When I treated my first patient, she had had her vagina totally destroyed by a firearm being fired point blank at her genitalia.

What were initially thought of as acts by single madmen acting alone turned out some months later to be a planned systematic campaign of rape.

All the women in whole villages were raped in a single night.

Tribal chiefs and church leaders were raped in public.

Elderly people and babies were raped.



Dr Denis Mukwege.
Photo: LWF/Albin Hillert

It thus became clear that these planned systematic acts of rape were being used as a weapon of war, with the following aims:

- Humiliating the enemy
- Destroying the social fabric
- Occupying abandoned land
- Mining raw materials and especially coltan.

Those facts have been documented in several reports from reliable sources.

Ladies and gentlemen, the war that is raging in my country and has produced such great disorder is a war motivated by the desire to control the Congolese sub-soil. This war, which at the beginning involved seven African states and was thus called the first great African war is neither ethical nor waged by religious fanatics. It is an economic war and it has already claimed five million dead and thousands upon thousands of women raped.

My initial response to this barbarity was to care physically and psychologically for the women who had been victims of sexual violence. But when I went on to operate on children born because of rape, themselves also rape victims, I realized that I had no choice but to speak out and condemn this unspeakable barbarity. That is why I am here with you this morning. That is why I have chosen from time to time to leave my operating theater to tell the world of the indescribable suffering of our fellow human beings, our equals, our sisters, our mothers and our daughters.

The second response was to provide victims of sexual violence with economic self-sufficiency by means of income-producing work and microcredits.

The third response was legal: fighting against impunity and, above all, giving moral and psychological support. Some women, who have been able to identify their tormenters



Plenary session from the visitors' gallery.
Photo: LWF/Johanan Celine Velariano

are being assisted by our lawyers in the legal procedures to obtain justice.

Ladies and gentlemen, there are many reasons for my joy at being with you. Let me mention some of them...

First of all, you represent tens of millions of Christians worldwide. I am sure that you will have attentive ears and faithful voices to make sure that the cries of these women who are the victims of sexual violence are heard so that never again will a woman be the victim of sexual violence in times of peace or war or the perpetrators go unpunished.

How is it possible for us to accept such barbarity in the twenty-first century?

It goes without saying that this diabolical phenomenon aims to wipe out the Christian faith and destroy life in the war areas. This phenomenon is particularly destructive in

Africa, where women are the mainstay of their families. In a town such as Bukavu, my native town, more than ninety percent out of a population of one million are unemployed, but through their smallholdings or small businesses, with a minute budget of less than fifty dollars, the women feed their whole families.

Women who are victims of sexual violence throughout the world need you. Whether in Yemen or Iraq or Syria or Burundi, the church must be the voice of the voiceless, the voice of these women who are the precious resource for the survival of humankind.

As ministers of the Word, you will not be ignorant of the impact that you can have on your parishioners through your preaching and catechism. For the root of sexual violence is to be found above all in the teaching in our churches that despises women. Misogyny, the belief in women's inferiority, is not unique to Africa. Certain theologies have reduced women

to the role of “reproducers” in the service of men. It is clear that there is a link between this misogyny, this teaching that despises women, supported by false theologies, and the sexual violence to which women are subjected whether in times of peace or times of war.

What are we to say about women’s rights in the world and in the church? We cannot ignore the great debate on the place of women in society and in the priesthood. It is a debate that is far from crystallizing enthusiasm in the church. But when the Lutheran church honors committed women in the priesthood, then it once again also honors Luther. Today, his fight for women’s rights still meets immense resistance to the prime place of women in the church and the brutal expression of men’s inhumanity towards women.

When he said, “We are all priests, as many Christians as we are,” Luther was fighting for women to be heard.

And yet the oppression of women and the still-existing inequality between men and women is a disgrace to the whole of humankind.

How can we be silent in face of this disfigurement of the face of Eve, the mother of humankind?

Lutheran theology, especially as regards women’s place in society, is a message of hope for all the women in the world who are victims of violence, whether moral, physical or sexual.

It is incumbent on us, the heirs of Martin Luther, by the Word of God to exorcise all the misogynist demons holding the world in their thrall, so that these victims of male barbarity may experience the kingdom of God in their lives.

The full and complete equality of the sexes remains a great victory yet to be won, for there

is still a long road ahead of us to give women the respect they deserve as free individuals with equal rights.

As I wrote in *Le Monde* on 6 November 2016: “The more I travel the world, the more I am saddened to see to what extent women are being instrumentalized, rejected and dehumanized and how social customs continue to keep them in a category of sub-humans.” This is unacceptable. By contrast, wherever they are trusted, wherever they are given their due place, families, communities and whole countries manage so much better. Getting by without them is like cutting off our potential for development. What a waste that is!

Brandishing aloft a key-ring, Desmond Tutu one day said that it was high time to hand over the keys of the world to women. He was right! Managing without them has resulted in failure. They have a high sense of respect for life whereas men respect power. Let us open up our decision-making centers to women! If we wish to have women in power, it is precisely because they contribute what men lack. So, I say, “Ladies, lead as women, react as women, be yourselves. That is your strength.” And that will be our opportunity.

We are in a time of paradox, indeed of conflict, between the Christian faith and the many challenges of time and space. Throughout the world, the forces of history seem to be surpassing all the messages of the gospel. The Christian faith seems more and more to be outmoded, incapable of responding to the needs of men and women, of rising to the challenges of our time.

As long as our faith is defined by theory and not connected with practical realities, we shall not be able to fulfil the mission entrusted to us by Christ.

ASSEMBLY REPORT

We are not here to rewrite the Bible and fit it to the present-day world but to believe in the credibility of the gospel in the twenty-first century, to release the grace given us by making the church a beacon that is still shining in this world of darkness, by fighting for justice, truth, right, freedom—in short, the dignity of men and women.

That is why misogynist theologies that support disrespect and abuse and, consequently, violence against women, must be corrected and replaced by a theology of respect for women. That work should begin with the catechizing of our children.

The mission of the church on earth is a prophetic mission to expose and also condemn evil. We have the duty to work at all levels in our society to foster legislation and procedures that rehabilitate women and enable them to flourish.

The other reason for my joy is the fact that Africa has been chosen to welcome this assembly in this 500th anniversary year of the Reformation. What a privilege that is!

May this commemoration be the occasion for Africa once again to base its teaching and liturgy on the foundational Reformation beliefs, namely;

- *Sola scriptura* (the Word alone)
- *Sola fide* (by faith alone)
- *Sola gratia* (by grace alone)
- *Solo Christo* (by Christ alone)
- *Soli Deo gloria* (to God alone be the glory)

In many places, those pillars—the legacy of the Reformation—have been either corrupted or replaced by other less glorious elements, exalting tribalism, sexism, money or power, all of which have dire and humanly degrading effects.

It is appropriate on this 500th anniversary to ask ourselves what the aim of the African

Protestant church is today. In many countries, human beings are no longer central to our theological thinking and action.

The theme of your assembly is “Liberated by God’s Grace.” It is because we have been liberated by grace that we must work for the liberation of others. If we do not do so, then we would be trampling the grace of God underfoot.

Despite some oases of peace, many places in the world are being exposed to all sorts of torments. How can we celebrate the grace of our liberation in Christ when around us and far from us, men and women are being mutilated, imprisoned, kept in sexual slavery, etc.?

I would so like to be optimistic about the future of the world in which we live...

But how can I rejoice in the face of indifference?

I would so like to rejoice at the day-by-day increase in the number of Protestants in my country and in the world but, alas, I am unable to do so!

How can I rejoice when the increase in the number of “believers” worldwide is still proportionately lower than the level of love and tolerance between peoples?

How can I rejoice when, every week, I am violently confronted with extremely violent rape of babies, girls, mothers and grandmothers?

How can I rejoice when I know full well that some economic and political decision makers deliberately close their eyes to the atrocities being suffered by women in order to protect the interests of certain international corporations engaged in the mining of “blood minerals”?

How can I rejoice?



The Luther Rose demonstrates its global reach during the first afternoon plenary of the Assembly. Photo: LWF/Johanan Celine Velariano

My awareness that I am “liberated by God’s grace” causes me to rejoice—in part. But it also awakens in me my responsibility towards all those who are unjustly ill-treated.

How can I rejoice when I know that throughout the world thousands of women are being subjected to sexual slavery?

The privilege of being “liberated by God’s grace” compels us to fight for those in the world who are less free.

You know better than I that the Protestant Reformation was the event that triggered off modernity. In fact, before Luther, all those who condemned abuses in the church of the time were killed. Luther opposed the practices of the church authorities that were contrary to the Word—and was able to survive!

Luther knew that his condemnation of the abuses by the church authorities could have

cost him his life. He was thus able to write his famous hymn, which runs:

*A safe stronghold our God is still,
A trusty shield and weapon...
And were this world all devils o’er
And watching to devour us,
We lay it not to heart so sore;
Not they can overpower us.*

At that time, the spoken word was dominant and the ecclesiastical institution claimed to hold the sole truth. People’s words were silenced. Now, to silence a person is to deny that person their personality. It is to deny their right to existence. In fact, there is no right to existence without the right to speak. Fighting for freedom of speech is fighting for the advancement and survival of men and women. It is in that context that the Protestant Reformation played a role in the humanism of the sixteenth century.

ASSEMBLY REPORT

It was thus with the Reformation that a fresh wind of freedom and life began to blow upon the world. The power of the Word had been lost and was found.

But what is the situation today? What has the Protestant church done with that freedom of speech?

Where is the church when the rights of the weak are being flouted? Where is the church? What is the church saying in the immense debates over recent tragedies in Iraq, Syria and the Congo?

In many countries, the church has lost its voice. It has become dumb, compliant and thus less prophetic.

By definition, the mission of the church on earth is to be the salt of the earth. It should thus be indispensable to unpretentiously demonstrate the presence of the kingdom of God on earth by defending justice and proclaiming the truth.

The church should be present wherever humankind is suffering. It must sometimes leave its church buildings, its cathedrals and its chapels to be alongside the homeless, the refugees, the illegal immigrants and all the unfortunate people who are around us.

Whenever the church has realized the extent of its calling, it has been able to move mountains.

It acted, among others, in the fight against apartheid with Bishop Desmond Tutu.

The churches, including the Lutheran Church, stood firm and played an important role in the abolition of slavery and of apartheid. Your fight against racism still goes on. It has not yet ended.

But unfortunately, the church has also often closed its eyes to those abuses for fear of retaliation or by conniving with the powers that be.

By acting in that way, we have lost our sense of vocation, we have betrayed God and we have betrayed God's people.

The church of today—and of tomorrow—faces a number of challenges: climate change, terrorism, migration, refugees, sexual violence and corrupt governments, particularly in Africa, who make and remake constitutions in order to protect their interests at the expense of the people.

If we are Christ's, we have no choice but to be alongside the weak, the wounded, the refugees and women suffering discrimination.

If we are Christ's, we must speak out, we must condemn evil. God has given the church the gift of speech for it to be the voice of the voiceless, to free the captives and always to watch for the coming of God's kingdom.

And if on our way, we meet adversity, opposition and persecution, we must not give up. We must keep on fighting to liberate the captives, to hold before us the kingdom promises and to make the words of Luther's hymn our own:

*And, though they take our house,
Life, honor, children, spouse,
Yet is their profit small;
These things shall vanish all:
The city of God remaineth.*

I thank you.



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