

Twelfth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation

Windhoek, 10 – 16 May 2017

Concept Note

Introduction

The Twelfth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation will be held in May 2017 in Windhoek, Namibia. As the highest governing body of the Lutheran World Federation, the Assembly will gather together representatives of its member churches, partner organizations, guests and others. The year 2017 coincides with the 500th anniversary of the Reformation and plans are underway to make the 500th anniversary a real opportunity for commemoration and celebration, for discernment and action as well as affirmation, growth and learning.

The overall objectives are to strengthen the global Communion, reaffirm the LWF's ecumenical commitment and its role as a vital instrument of God's love and transforming actions in this world. As it is the case with the overall approach to the LWF's approach to the Reformation anniversary, the commemoration and celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation will be undertaken with a spirit of ecumenical sensitivity and accountability. Lutheran Reformation is not an exclusive property of Lutheran churches. Rather, it has evolved further, leading to other expressions of reformation in the church. Different denominations, beyond the Lutheran, claim ownership over key features of the theological insights of Lutheran Reformation of the 16th century. Indeed, Lutheran reformation was, and continues to be a contribution into the whole of the body of Christ, and to the world at large. Furthermore, the LWF wants to emphasize that Reformation anniversary is not just an *event* but a *process* that starts in 2015 and involves programmes and activities at all levels, from local, national and regional to global. The Twelfth Assembly, therefore, is very much a culmination of this process and a converging point for all major undertakings that have implications in the life, thinking and work of the global communion.

As the climax of this three-year process and as a milestone that will set the tone for the future, the Assembly will gather the fruits of the work being undertaken on the way to Namibia as these are framed in the LWF Strategy and guided by the vision, "Liberated by God's grace, a communion in Christ living together for a just, peaceful and reconciled world." These fruits will consist of the outcomes and impact of various programmes and projects involving theological reflection and dialogue, liturgy, mission and development, advocacy and diakonia as well as those involving youth and women. As the highest statutory body of the LWF, the Assembly will also attend to its business, guided by rules and procedures that will frame the discussions and debates, voting and decision-making. As an event taking place at a significant juncture in the life of the global communion, the Assembly presents a golden opportunity to reflect collectively about how the work and engagements at various levels have made an impact on our Lutheran

identity and use this to strengthen commitment to ecumenism and our calling to be witnesses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the world today.

The venue chosen for the Twelfth Assembly is Windhoek, Namibia and this choice has great significance for the global Lutheran Communion. The history of the relationship between the LWF and the Lutheran churches in Namibia is closely intertwined with the larger context of the struggle for justice, freedom and sovereignty, indeed, the struggle for human dignity of all Namibians. Therefore, rooting the Assembly in Namibian soil symbolizes and crystallizes the decades of churches' accompaniment with Namibia and will be an occasion to give thanks to God for the grace that has kept hope alive to this day. Needless to say, the journey towards healing and genuine reconciliation continues and this is a theme that will be woven into the fabric of the different sessions and conversations during the Assembly.

Objectives

Following are the objectives of the Twelfth Assembly:

- To strengthen the worldwide Lutheran Communion and its churches as they begin their witness and service for the next 500 years, discerning and sharing how the Lutheran Reformation continues to be alive and active in the Church and in the world.
- To grow in faith through worship, prayer and music and as a confessing community be open to new theological insights borne out of Lutheran engagement and witness in the world
- To celebrate the work and achievements of the past seven years as reflected in the LWF Strategy, the impact it has made in the lives of individuals, their communities and churches and in society as a whole and to seek input in the development of a strategic framework that would chart the way for the next period in the life of the Global Communion
- To strengthen the prophetic role and witness of the Global Communion on major global issues and challenges related to the theme and sub-themes of the Assembly through inspirational and challenging presentations as well as the sharing of stories and good practices
- To address some of the core issues facing the life of the Global Communion at national, regional and global levels
- To reflect upon, commemorate and celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation with special reference to its ecumenical and global contexts while at the same time instilling a sense of belonging to and reaffirming the LWF's unique identity as a global church communion
- To learn about the local context of Namibia and the regional context of Southern Africa, with special reference to reconciliation and healing and to the impact of the involvement of the Lutheran World

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Federation in the countries that make up the African continent

- To deal with issues related to governance and elect the next generation of leadership that will guide the LWF in the next period of its life.

Theme

The Assembly will gather around the central theme “Liberated by God’s grace”. This theme, which also frames the LWF’s approach to the 500th anniversary of Lutheran Reformation in 2017, articulates two pivotal insights of Lutheran theology: the prevalence of God’s grace when it comes to justification, and the gift of freedom that results from God’s transformative action.

God’s abundant and overflowing grace that forgives and calls people into new life escapes the control and the dominion of human beings. Grace is and remains God’s free gift, yet costly, acquired at the cross of Jesus Christ. Apprehended by faith, God’s justifying grace expressed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ liberates human beings for new life, life in abundance.

The concepts of grace and freedom or liberty describe the two dimensions of Christian life, which is always and simultaneously, gift and task. In fact, in the Lutheran theological tradition the freedom that results from the free gift of grace is understood with a strong diaconal perspective: it is a freedom that calls human beings to serve God, the neighbor and creation. It is by and through service that the richness of the gift of grace, so intrinsically connected to God’s redemptive action manifested in Christ’s death and resurrection becomes fully expressed. Diakonia becomes the evidence that the gift of freedom is always shaped by the sign of the cross. As such, the Assembly theme will invite the global Lutheran communion to articulate the cornerstone of its confessional foundation – the theology of justification – and how the gift of justification calls Lutheran churches to both “live and work together as a communion in Christ”, and to make their togetherness as a communion to become a witness and a transformative contribution “for a just, peaceful and reconciled world” (LWF mission statement).

In addition, the Assembly will structure its work around three sub-themes:

Salvation - not for sale;

Human beings - not for sale;

Creation - not for sale;

The threefold “not for sale” captures a key insight that triggered Luther’s public opposition to ecclesial practices of his time and which eventually resulted in the launch of the Reformation movement: the free gift of grace should not be a good exchanged in commercial relationships.



By focusing on the three sub-themes the Assembly will offer a space to critically reflect on the attempts to subjugate, control and trade what ultimately cannot be defined as commodities and should therefore never be subjected to trade or monetization: salvation, human beings and creation. Hence, the emphasis will be on a contemporary reflection and articulation of what the core insight of the Reformation offers to the world today - a world that continues to be characterized by the longing of humanity for salvation and wholeness, for a dignified life, for healed relationships. It is a world that attempts to cope with the humongous challenge of identifying and expressing the values that affirm the dignity and fundamental rights of every human being, and that would foster the relationship of the human family with God's creation today groaning and suffering as a result of human action.

Vision and values guiding the Assembly

The program and methodology of the Twelfth Assembly will be elaborated with the aim of making the Assembly:

- A joyful assembly where churches and their representatives celebrate being together, are encouraged and empowered for further witness in their own contexts, yet much better aware of how each of them are wonderfully woven into global communion relations.

- A transformative assembly which offers clear and powerful narratives about what it is to be churches that are living together for a just, peaceful and reconciled world, drawing from the liberating power of God's grace.

- A forward-looking Assembly which strategizes for the future through intentional listening and mutual learning between generations and in this process incorporating the visions and hopes of youth as they think and dream their churches, their communion and this one world in which we live and transform together.

- An outward-looking Assembly which will look at the world through its joys, pains and struggles and courageously dare to speak with a clear and intelligible voice for justice, with a recognizable and compassionate diaconal concern and an unwavering passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The guiding values of the LWF (see LWF Strategy 2012-2017, p. 10):

- Dignity and justice
- Compassion and commitment
- Respect for diversity
- Inclusion and participation
- Transparency and accountability

The way towards the Assembly: Pre-Assemblies

Through their engagement in programs and processes related to the Reformation anniversary, the 144 member churches of the LWF will be able to engage in a unique preparation process towards the Twelfth Assembly. As an intermediate step before bringing their own discussions and discernments to the Assembly, the pre-assemblies taking place prior to the Assembly will play a key role in further helping and shaping the preparation process towards the Assembly. There will be regional pre-assemblies in Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas (a proposal at this stage to have the North American and the Latin American & Caribbean region meeting together). In addition there will be a youth and a women's pre-assembly. The pre-assemblies play a vital role in preparing member churches to participate actively in the Assembly. It is also in the regional pre-assemblies that leadership for the next period in the life of the Communion is nominated for presentation to and voting at the Assembly.

The pre-assemblies will take into account the theme and sub-themes of the Assembly and ensure coherence and continuity between them. However, this need for coherence and continuity will not overlook the richness, diversity and the specificities of each regional context as well as the distinct needs of women and youth within the Global Communion. Instead, the Assembly will be a celebration of the diversity that comes together in Namibia and will use it as a tool for learning, dialogue and sharing.

Planning and preparations

The planning and preparations for the Twelfth Assembly have been taken up at various levels of governance. An Assembly Planning Committee was constituted in 2013 and presented its report to the LWF Council in Medan (Indonesia) in June 2014. An International Worship Planning Committee was appointed at the same meeting. A preliminary budget has also been approved and with it the Assembly fees. The vision for the Twelfth Assembly as well as broad guidelines for the concept as a whole has been articulated by these different bodies including the Special Committee for the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. Most of the detailed work on developing the content and methodology of the Assembly will be undertaken within the Communion Office and will seek further input from the APC and the Council until it is finalized. A Local Assembly Planning Committee has been constituted recently and will assist in hosting the Assembly and ensuring that the logistical as well as certain aspects of program work are facilitated. The General Secretary provides overall leadership for the planning and preparations and is assisted by the Assembly Coordinator.

Returning home after the Assembly

The design of the Assembly is developed in such a way that important impulses and gifts would be offered to participants and the LWF member churches at large once the Assembly is concluded. This would be offered through messages and resolutions, but also through the experiences, the insights and the learning resulting from the exposure to each other, but also through interaction with each other and with the Namibian and the African context. Thus, the program and its methodologies are designed in a way that they will significantly shape the 500th anniversary commemorations that LWF member churches and their ecumenical relations will have in their own contexts on October 31, 2017.