

Address of the LWF President
Bishop Dr Munib Younan

„Hope Does Not Disappoint“

My dear brothers and sisters,

- (1) It is a pleasure to be here with you in Geneva for this meeting of the Council of the Lutheran World Federation.
- (2) I have chosen to speak on the theme “Hope does not disappoint.” This is not an easy topic today. Many of us come from places of deep unrest and trouble. Indeed, my home in Jerusalem is filled with disappointment, much of which results from the experiences in the latter half of 2014. While the collapse of another round of peace talks was disappointing, what happened afterwards was astonishing: rampant violence in Jerusalem, the constant efforts of extremist Jews to claim part or all of the Haram al-Sharif, the murder of Israeli young people, the burning to death of Muhammad al-Khudair and the following eruption of violence from and in Gaza.
- (3) Things are not better on the global level. Former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev said earlier this year that we may be on the verge of a new Cold War.¹ Others are suggesting that a new world order is emerging where the countries of the global North again divide the world among themselves. During his recent visit to Sarajevo, Pope Francis warned that “a kind of third world war [is] being fought piecemeal and, in the context of global communications, we sense an atmosphere of war.”² There are some attempting to promote religious wars for their own political and economic interests. We continue to face an immense global immigration crisis, responded to with expanding expressions of callous disregard for these beloved children of God. In the Middle East, Christians are feeling chased away from their homelands for the first time since the Crusades. Hope does not disappoint, but it is sometime difficult to find the courage to hope.
- (4) Hope does not disappoint. The phrase comes from the beginning of chapter five in Paul’s letter to the church in Rome: “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (5.1–5).
- (5) What we see here is that hope is not only the opposite and antidote to suffering, but is intimately bound up with suffering. As Paul says, “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.” It is through suffering—both as individuals and in our

¹ “Gorbachev: US dragging Russia into new Cold War, which might grow into armed conflict,” *RT News* (29 January 2015), available online at <http://rt.com/news/227423-us-russia-cold-war/>.

² Olivier Baube and Rusmir Smajilhodzic, “In Sarajevo, Pope says world haunted by atmosphere of war,” *L’Agence France-Presse* (6 June 2015), available online at <http://news.yahoo.com/pope-francis-says-senses-atmosphere-war-world-100033959.html>.

communities—that we come to know hope. The hope we have is not the result of some worldly optimism. It is instead the result of God's love, revealed to us by the Holy Spirit.

1. The Hope we Proclaim

- (6) Jürgen Moltmann continues to be the contemporary theologian most identified with the concept of hope. His reflections on the topic have guided mainstream theologians and church leaders for decades. Devastated by the sufferings of World War II—the horrors of Nazi concentration camps, the destruction of his country, and his own experiences as a prisoner of war—Moltmann's theology of hope emerged from his own witness of despair. For Moltmann, as acquainted as he was with the suffering of this world, Christian hope is tied to eschatology, Christian understandings of the "last things." It was in eschatology, in his understanding of God's ultimate purpose in history, that Moltmann found the "logos" of Christian hope. For Moltmann, reflecting on the last things as "the doctrine of Christian hope" is a process of embracing "both the object hoped for and also the hope inspired by it." In this way, Christianity itself "is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present." If, as Moltmann claims, eschatology is not "only part of Christian doctrine" but "characteristic of all Christian proclamation, of every Christian existence and of the whole Church," it is a worthy topic for our reflection.³
- (7) A similar line of thought was explored by German Catholic theologian Johann Baptist Metz. He located the hope of the future in the cultivation of memory. As he puts it, the unjust crucifixion of Jesus is a specific memory of suffering presenting "a dangerous memory of freedom in the social systems." Dangerous memories are not nostalgia or visions of the past, but "memories which make demands on us" in the present. Such memories are ones "that we have to take into account, memories, as it were, with a future content." Metz's emphasis on "the remembered history of suffering" constitutes what he calls a "dangerous tradition" best expressed "in narrative form," taking "the form of dangerous and liberating stories." The Christian telling of the memory of Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection offers a "specific *memoria passionis*, on which is grounded the promise of future freedom for all. We remember the future of our freedom in the memory of his suffering." In this way, "dangerous memory . . . threatens the present and calls it into question because it remembers a future that is still outstanding."⁴ To remember Jesus—the foundation of hope that does not disappoint—is to put on notice all manifestations of unjust suffering in the past and the present. We find this memory not just in proclamation, but in the sacraments, where our remembrance of Jesus recognizes his presence and power today.⁵
- (8) Both Moltmann and Metz show us that, in Christian faith, the "hope does not disappoint" is an eschatological hope grounded in God's ultimate purposes. At the same time, it is a hope that demands our response to the suffering of human communities in the here and now. In Colossians, we read that through Christ "God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross" (Colossians 1.19–20). This is tied to the eschatological vision to come, when God will be all in all (1 Cor. 15.28), when "at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue . . . confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2.10–11), a time

³ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 16.

⁴ Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury, 1980), 110, 111, 200. A new translation has been published by J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Crossroad, 2004).

⁵ See Bruce T. Morrill, *Anamnesis as Dangerous Memory: Political and Liturgical Theology in Dialogue* (Collegetown, MN: Pueblo, 2000).

when Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away" (Rev. 21.4).

- (9) Moltmann and Metz, after their profound experiences of suffering and inhumanity, remind us that these apocalyptic passages of eschatological hope are not about avoiding the realities of the present. Our hope is not that we will be rescued from this world. Our hope instead is that, because we know the ultimate purposes of God, we can proclaim the Good News in word and deed, bringing the promised future into the present, even as we remember the sufferings of the past and present. Our eschatological hope is not that we will be snatched away from this world, but that God's perfect reconciliation will come to us. In the meantime, we offer, "with gentleness and reverence . . . an account of the hope that is in [us]" (1 Peter 3.15–16), because "God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, . . . has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5.18–19).
- (10) Hope does not disappoint. It does not disappoint us. It also does not disappoint our neighbors. We do not leave anyone behind. Our global communion's commitment to holistic mission and prophetic diakonia means that we seek the flourishing of all human communities. We refuse to buy into systems that protect our interests alone. Although we do not often speak in such terms, our hope is apocalyptic and eschatological. Throughout our global communion, our churches are confronted with different forms of apocalyptic and eschatological hope that inspire violence and extremism rather than mutual concern and care for the Other. The challenge ahead of us today is to offer a strong defense of religious and political moderation, to respectfully offer a reason for the hope that is within us, even as we confront the worldly nihilism religiously-sanctioned extremism. Because of the reconciliation of the world we trust is already accomplished through Christ Jesus, it is our calling to be ambassadors of reconciliation and agents of hope.

2. The Lutheran Witness of Moderation

- (11) Our world today is filled with apocalyptic movements. We receive daily reports about a group calling itself Islamic State seeking to create spheres of dogmatic purity by inflicting human suffering on vulnerable communities. We see the merchants of the Prosperity Gospel creating the illusion of wealth and happiness while consigning others to suffering and loss. We see the constant preaching of many evangelists telling us that the new chosen ones will be raptured away from worldly suffering, offering escapism instead of hope. We see other preachers relying almost solely on the strength of empire, placing their hope in human power to achieve their interpretations of prophecy.
- (12) In other words, our world is in the midst of an apocalyptic battle. While these ideas are foreign to many Lutherans, we must address the problem that we are surrounded by this mentality. In the Middle East, we find visiting groups of Christian Zionists eager to see prophecy fulfilled from their hotel balconies. Some Christians are connecting the persecution of Christians with the Great Tribulation as a sign of the end; they appear comfortable with that as long as the apocalyptic goal is reached. Even if they raise the issue of Christian persecution, it is not because they love us; they are more concerned for proving their apocalyptic scenarios and showing that other religions are evil. We are surrounded by people more concerned with abstract ideas than with real human communities, people with theological worldviews in which the ends justify the means. For them, even the most violent interpretation of God's purposes justifies any and all forms of human degradation and suffering.
- (13) The same way of thinking is found among Jews and Muslims. Jewish extremism is organized around the goal of protecting and promoting illegal settlement activity, much of it violently implemented by religious zealots. They claim that God has given them this land and that are

allowed to follow God's law rather than international law. Extremist Islamic groups—ISIS, Nusra Front, Hisham, Hamas, Hezbollah; even Jamat Islamiyya in Jordan—they believe they are on an apocalyptic mission to clean the world of dirt. I am sure that the same rhetoric is to be found among Boko Haram and Al-Shabab, as well as Islamist movements developing in other parts of the Islamic world.

- (14) Where do we Lutherans stand in the midst of this apocalyptic battle? To be sure, we cannot stand with our hands tied. We must give another voice. The human suffering tolerated and perpetrated by these groups demands that we speak. In this global context, how do we proclaim our hope that does not disappoint?
- (15) In order to confront the false apocalyptic thought pervading today's world, we would do well to reclaim Martin Luther as an apocalyptic thinker. The examples provided by Jürgen Moltmann and Johann Baptist Metz remind us that we must not be afraid of apocalyptic thought, image, and literature. Eschatology is not the realm of fundamentalists alone.
- (16) Robert Smith, who serves as my Special Adviser, has pointed out that the Lutheran Reformation commenced in a context of shared threat from both Roman Catholic authority and Turkish military efforts. The 1530 imperial Diet of Augsburg took place during Suleiman's siege of Vienna. The Diet's main purpose was to organize defensive efforts. During the Diet, "Luther was housed north of Nürnberg in the Coburg Castle so he might more easily be consulted by his colleagues." During this time in the "wilderness," Luther began translating the Bible into the German vernacular. As Smith says, Luther's "first finished product was a translation and short commentary on Ezekiel 39–40, in which Luther interpreted Ezekiel's apocalyptic 'Gog' and 'Magog' to be the Ottoman Empire. His hope was that 'all the faithful might . . . draw courage and comfort from this passage.'" In 1532, Luther published a complete translation of the prophets. The preface he wrote for that collection extended Luther's pastoral concern. "Believing that the prophets 'bear witness to the kingdom of Christ in which we now live,' Luther found in them 'strong comfort and comforting strength.'" Smith concludes that "Luther's approach—what might be described as pastoral apocalypticism— informed his interpretations of both scripture and history, especially the imminent threats of the pope and the Turk."⁶
- (17) There is a fundamental difference between Luther's apocalyptic approach and much of what we are seeing today. Rather than provide "strong comfort and comforting strength" to communities living under threat and oppression, apocalyptic thought is used today to exert power. Rather than serving as a refuge for the poor and oppressed, much of the religiously-sanctioned violence we are seeing today promotes oppression and creates more refugees. "What does it mean," Smith asks, "that, in our time, the apocalyptic visions of Daniel and Revelation and Ezekiel—all written to sustain the weary with a word of hope—have been taken over by those in power, and have become a tool of empire?"⁷
- (18) Today, the "religious option" in the public sphere is associated with extremism and totalitarianism alone. It is our responsibility to confront false messages of eschatological hope with the wisdom and clarity of Lutheran doctrine and biblical interpretation. Reformation history gives us tools for engaging in this urgent project. One can draw an analogy between today's religious extremists and the enthusiasts in Luther's time who sought to establish utopian orders using violence. I am

⁶ Robert O. Smith, *More Desired than Our Own Salvation: The Roots of Christian Zionism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 50–51.

⁷ Robert O. Smith, "Prophecy, the Pope, and the Turk: Luther's Pastoral Apocalyptic," in *On the Apocalyptic and Human Agency: Conversations with Augustine of Hippo and Martin Luther*, ed. Kirs Stjerna and Deanna A. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholar's Publishing, 2014), 15.

thinking here of Thomas Müntzer and, to a lesser extent, Andreas Karlstadt. Luther railed against their efforts to create manifestations of God's presumed will. While, as we have discussed, we do have a utopian vision, it will arrive outside of our efforts. This side of the *parousia*, it is not within our power to grasp or create. As Jesus says to his disciples, "About that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come" (Mark 13.32–33). History shows us that manufactured utopia is bound to end in dystopia. This was true for Müntzer and Karlstadt and it is already true for ISIS and other extremist groups, no matter their religious claims. Our hope is in God. It is a hope that refuses to be silent in the face of injustice and human suffering. Trusting God's will in ultimate things, we have work to do in the present.

- (19) Just as we do not embrace utopianism, we reject escapism. In the present era of Christian history, apocalyptic thought is most often associated with free-church evangelicals. Televangelists preaching about the Rapture of the church or interpreting world events and politics through the lens of scripture have captivated their viewers since the mid-1800s. This style of Christian faith has adopted many aspects of consumer society, especially in its acceptance of the so-called prosperity gospel. Wherever I go in the world, I hear people claim that if you have a car and wear a nice tie, God has blessed you with this and that. The other side of this equation, of course, is that if you are facing challenges, if your child falls ill, or if your best milking goat dies, God is somehow withdrawing blessing from you because of something you have done or failed to do. The false gospel of prosperity contains no love, no grace, no faith. It proposes nothing more than a mere financial transaction between God and human beings, like a modern-day quick-fix indulgence for the here-and-now. Thus we see that the so-called prosperity gospel is nothing less than a Gospel-destroying Theology of Glory seeking to shop indulgences in the here and now. Already, we see that such teachings often connect with narrow apocalyptic understandings of God's will for the world.
- (20) But do we have the courage to proclaim our hope, to give a reason for the hope that does not disappoint? Lutherans have developed a reputation for being quiet during difficult times. The extremists are not afraid to say what they believe. What is our response? What is the hope of the Resurrection that we bring to the world? The Lutheran understanding of the Cross means that we cannot fully know God's mind. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD" (Isaiah 55.8). We cannot see behind it to God's ultimate will. One result of this limitation is that Lutherans do not engage in totalizing visions of social order or presume to connect any one state or government with God's Word and will. This awareness has several implications for us. First, Lutherans do not seek spheres of purity. Although our history witnesses against us in many ways, Lutheran theology has the capacity to live with many different kinds of neighbors. Second, others can identify us as moderates. The challenge today is what moderation can truly mean.
- (21) I believe that we should strongly reclaim the Lutheran political witness of robust pragmatic moderation. Others will accuse us of weak witness. In the public sphere, we trust that we have what is needed to establish good order if not perfect justice. Our political vision is therefore realistic, not utopian. So what is our vision? It is a world where each person has love and care for their neighbor. Where there is enough food, that food is shared. Where every person's gifts are honored and utilized no matter their gender or their social standing. Where everyone has the right to worship in their own way. Where one's historic homeland is honored, not stolen. Where there is no unjust enforcement of uniformity or conformity. Where we value the flourishing of human community: creativity, culture, human rights, and participate fully in sharing resources, historical heritage, and the promotion of mutual development. In this vision, we taste the hope that strips me

of my selfishness and focus on my interests alone. This hope grounds me in a communion with a vision for the world. It makes me part of a larger whole where I am comfortable with differences and diversities; a hope and a family that dreams together to further the kingdom of God; works in holistic mission together, including prophetic diakonia, works for justice together.

- (22) Through such a witness of robust moderation, we reject the so-called “religious option.” The confidence of our Lutheran tradition in the hope that does not disappoint calls us to live fully in this world. Luke’s Gospel tells us that some scholars once asked Jesus when to expect the kingdom of God. He told them ‘The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed. . . . For, in fact, the kingdom of God is within you’ (17.20–21). Moderates are not wishy-washy. The moderate is not a person without identity. If we are going to challenge extremist theologies and the extremist politics they produce, we need to reclaim the robust moderation of our Lutheran tradition. Informed by the dangerous memory of our Lord’s suffering, death, and resurrection, our hope is anchored in the hope of God’s coming reconciliation of all things. This hope is present today, both for our neighbors and for our global ecology and environment. This hope does not separate us from our neighbors and the earth but calls us into ever greater concern for their wellbeing.

3. Responding to Global Conflict

- (23) We are seeing new manifestations of Islamic extremism, throughout the Islamic world. It is not my intention to single out Muslims or Islam for criticism. Indeed, these new forms of Islam are causing problems not for Christians alone, but for Muslim communities themselves. These groups are causing massive instability and suffering in many different parts of the world, stretching from Nigeria to Iraq to Kenya to Pakistan to Bangladesh. It is a time of great confusion and upheaval. It is understandable if you cannot propose a comprehensive response. From a Christian perspective, however, it is clear that we are facing a global crisis of relations with new forms of Islam.
- (24) It is important that we seek to understand the causes of apocalyptic extremism. Extremism is a choice of last resort. Religious extremism draws from an external, divine source when there are no clear practical prospects for improving one’s condition. Religious extremism offers a practical alternative to crushing poverty, especially when that poverty is supported by unjust systems and structures. The Islamist groups are able to speak about establishing a caliphate both because they believe we are living in a sinful age of corruption and decadence, but also because other forms of government have failed many peoples in the Middle East and in Muslim-majority contexts throughout the world.
- (25) Our communion must assist Christian communities living alongside new and dangerous forms of Islamist ideology. The world around them is rapidly changing. While many Christians are eager for dialogue with all of their neighbors, there can be little dialogue with someone convinced that you should leave your land or be beheaded. We cannot leave this challenge to the micro level; it is not a local concern alone. I believe it is essential for the Lutheran World Federation to take the lead, along with other international organizations, to call a conference of Christians living in Muslim-majority contexts. We must speak with one another to better comprehend the changes happening around us and to develop contextual strategies for promoting diversity so our people can thrive in their lands. We must develop together strategies for the witness of political moderation, reminding people of faith that abundant life in *this* world—not just the next world—is worth struggling for. We must find ways to address the persecution of Christian and other minority communities where it is happening and prevent that possibility where it is not happening. It is not our goal to protect ourselves alone, but prevent radicalization of societies so all communities may flourish.
- (26) As a global communion, we have two specific interests in such a conference. First, we must discern how we as a communion can accompany the mission of those churches. What resources

can we bring to bear on their specific challenges? Second, all members of our communion must be aware that if we do not address these issues to day, the threat will only continue to grow. These extremist groups are already present in many other contexts. Pope Francis has warned of “a kind of third world war being fought piecemeal.” These groups will engage in more direct attacks within Europe and North America as their resources and capabilities grow. It is time for western Christians to listen to and learn from Christian sisters and brothers who have long been living with these challenges.

- (27) The need is urgent. The Christian women of Pakistan are not waiting for another statement from our Council. They are waiting for action. They are waiting on the possibility of tangible hope. The Christian families in Nigeria whose daughters were brutally taken from them by Boko Haram are not waiting for our next policy paper. They need our help. We need to sit and discuss with one another and with Muslim scholars with sanity. This issue will come back to our table if we do not address it directly. It is too late once you are in the midst of the bloodshed; like in Nigeria, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, Pakistan. But even there you can prepare for a shared future. North Atlantic media are not discussing this crisis in depth. There appear to be many geopolitical interests at play that are interests in hiding the crisis from our eyes. In the meantime, the threat of radicalization is taking on global proportions. I am ringing the bell of warning. We must have a dialogue. What will be our approach?
- (28) In addition to strengthening churches living in Muslim-majority contexts, accompanying them with the goal of encouraging their leadership in their own homes, we can respond to this crisis by renewing our advocacy priorities in the Middle East. Throughout the Islamic world, from West Africa to South Asia, Christians should be strengthened to assert their place as an integral part of their people, not a marginalized minority. Even as we are seeing the potential fragmentation of nation-states like Syria and Iraq, we must be in close conversation with influential governments about what configurations of government will best promote the flourishing of all human communities present in those areas. We should continue to warn against governmental efforts to manipulate religious identities for political or geostrategic purposes. We should also warn against the formation of new governments along religious lines, preferring instead constitutional governments focused on the principle of equal citizenship with equal rights and equal responsibilities.
- (29) In the Middle East, we should focus clearly and explicitly on efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Although regional issues have distracted key players in the international community from this priority, we must remember that the conflict is one of the chief recruiters for extremists, whether they are Jews, Christians, or Muslims. There is growing interest among politicians and policymakers, asking how governments outside Israel can best respond to the illegality of Israeli settlements. What effect might it have on congregations and churches, especially in Europe, to accurately label the origin of goods produced in the settlements? Our communion recognizes that our commitment to a just two-state solution and a Jerusalem shared by two peoples and three religions is challenged by ongoing settlement activity in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. The Green Line—the armistice line that held until 1967—should be unequivocal basis of negotiations for the borders of the State of Palestine and the State of Israel. The complexities of sharing Jerusalem should be addressed first, not held until the end of negotiations. The churches should be leading our governments in action on Israel and Palestine. To appropriate an image from Martin Luther King, Jr., instead of following their lead, registering their temperatures like a thermometer, we should be their thermostat, guiding their actions.

4. The Hope of Communion

- (30) My friends, our hope in the reconciling love of God in Christ Jesus calls us to get our hands dirty in the service of our neighbor. The dangerous memory of Jesus' crucifixion calls us to ask more and more questions about the deadly structures of injustice that permeate our world. We must face these challenges together. It is good that we can gather here in a spirit of accompaniment and mutual support. As President of our global communion, I am able to see the wonderful ways Lutherans around the world connect with and sustain one another in their difficult work. And as President, I am aware of the many disagreements we have within our diverse global body. Just as with the first Christian communities, we are not all of one mind on several of issues. The first Christians felt that their unity is in Christ; our unity is also found in Christ and our distinctive emphasis on justification by grace through faith. Part of my role as President of this diverse communion is to help ensure unity while not seeking uniformity.
- (31) The crisis I have been describing today is precisely the sort of situation in which our communion can live into its calling of giving a voice to the voiceless and seeking the flourishing of all human communities. It challenges us to again move beyond disaster assistance and charity to address both the structural causes of poverty and insecurity while building the capacity of wealthier societies to better accompany persons and communities experiencing need.
- (32) Instead of giving the world empty words, we must find ways for us, as a communion, to show the love of God, proclaiming our hope to the world. How can we show that we are liberated by grace through faith? How can we ensure that the prophetic diakonia we seek to offer can transform hatred into love, animosity into friendship, violations of human rights into respect for all rights, poverty into equal opportunity, injustice for women into gender justice? This prophetic witness cannot be realized among Lutherans alone. We must work together with other churches and ecumenical families to realize God's will of life abundant.
- (33) We are bound together in shared hope. For us to have sustainable unity among Lutheran churches, however, we must ensure that we are speaking in terms we can recognize with one another. We have many Lutheran seminaries throughout the world. But what is the common line from which we are teaching our emerging leaders? How can we be sustainable if we are producing generations of leaders who do not comprehend one another theologically? The unity and sustainability of our churches will be strengthened with some form of theological coordination. This common language will help with developing the self-understanding of our communion and assist us as we discern approaches to shared social-ethical problems.
- (34) I am concerned, however, with how much the idea of communion is received throughout our member churches. In my visits to regional gatherings and in individual member churches, I have noticed that many other priorities and topics tend to push aside the question of communion. When I participated in the All-Africa Lutheran Conference last month, we reflected on the importance of questions at the first such conference in 1955. In 1955, one of the central questions was "Quo Vadis Africa?" or "Where are you going, Africa?"⁸ In 1955, the theologians and church leaders gathered in Tanganyika were conscious of the many problems facing the continent as it emerged from a period of colonization and domination. Everything was being renegotiated in every sphere of society—economic, political, and civil.
- (35) Today, in Geneva, we might ask "Quo Vadis Communio"? Where are we going as a communion? My sense is that we cannot know where we are going without a full self-understanding of who we

⁸ I drew this theme from the comments of L.B. Greaves and S.E. Bengu as recorded in *Marangu: A Record of The All-Africa Lutheran Conference* (12–22 Nov. 1955), ed. Fridtjov Birkell (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, Dept. of World Mission, 1956), 140–42.

claim to be. I am grateful that our self-understanding project is making progress. This is especially the case when we consider our regional expressions. In Africa, I was happy to hear “one church, one faith, one Africa.” But we must also add awareness of “one communion.” I am concerned that some approaches to regional identity could lead to church-tribal thinking. Being a Lutheran today is different than when the LWF was founded in 1947. My identity as an Arab Palestinian Lutheran Christian is directly connected with African spirituality, with the Asian appreciation of mystery, with the heritage of European enlightenment, with American inventiveness and ingenuity, all alongside Latin American liberation. Each of these strands have supported and informed me in the Communion to say that a Lutheran today is no more an individual designation. The communion has made me not just a global citizen but an interdependent Christian.

- (36) This communion is our home. If our communion is not sustainable, our hope will fragment. Gathering together in communion is not a mere activity; it is an essential relationship that gives me spiritual strength, reminding each of us that we are not alone in this world. Just as the disciples walking on the road to Emmaus were confused, I am often confused about how to act in this world. But just as the disciples met Jesus, who they knew in the breaking of bread, so are we when we receive the bread and drink the cup—this communion re-kindles in our hearts the hope that does not disappoint.
- (37) Our hope is in the future God has prepared for us, a future we know in the love of Christ. Our communion strengthens our capacity to bear witness to that hope. Without the communion, we cannot fully express our hope. Thus, the communion is not an end in itself, but is at the same time essential for what we are called to in this world. As we head to the 500th anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation we are called to again proclaim the freshness of the Gospel of Love throughout the world. This effort will be deepened by a strong commitment to renewed self-understanding as *ecclesia semper reformanda*. Reformation cannot be without communion; communion only survives with constant reformation.
- (38) As I conclude this speech, I share with you that I have been reflecting a great deal on Colossians 3 and its message for our communion:
- (39) As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (12–17)
- (40) Is this not the vision for our communion? Gathered as the people of God, bearing one another, forgiving each other—and in all this teaching each other, warning each other, thanking the Lord together. When you admonish and warn me, you are not hating me, but loving me. Even if we offer criticism on certain issues, we take it as an expression of love. Because we love our Lord so much, we love one another and are responsible towards the other.
- (41) There are of course temptations in this path. The religious leader, like any human being, can be seduced by the benefits of earthly power. The religious leader can be co-opted by systems of worldly power, especially when those systems come wrapped in religious clothing. We have all seen how religion can be made to serve as a handmaiden to nationalism, especially in contexts where national aspirations are new or not yet achieved. For these and other reasons, the religious

leader must be careful, always on guard about her or his motivations. We must therefore be in conversation with one another, warning one another about the things to which we may be blind. This is one of the chief benefits of our communion: that we share our concerns with one another before those concerns become crises.

- (42) As Martin Luther reminds us, "Our hope rests on a living God. We do not place our hope in the world. We do not work or suffer reproach so that we experience the favor, wealth, and high positions of the world.... Our hope is truly in a real God.... The person, then, who has this confidence acts the more freely and endures everything, because he or she always has this confidence in pleasing God."⁹
- (43) The hope that does not disappoint, then, is hope for the world. It is not hope that we escape this world, but that God will join us here, reconciling all things to God's will. This promise of reconciliation is prefigured in our efforts to gather in communion. Being in communion is not about a utopian vision, but holding on to the hope of the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ, a hope given to us by the power of the Holy Spirit. Even when we disagree and even when we misread a situation and get something completely wrong, we take solace in knowing that "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."

May God bless you.

⁹ Martin Luther, "Lectures on I Timothy," in *Luther's Works, Vol. 28: Selected Pauline Epistles*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald (St. Louis: Concordia, 1973), 325.