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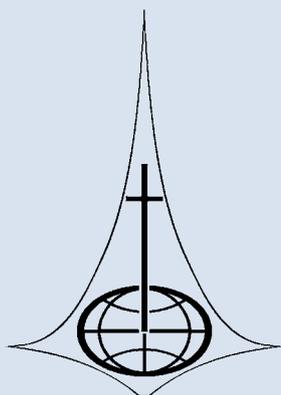
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Theologians Deliberate Perspectives Reshaping Contemporary Lutheran Theology



Participants of the LWF/DTS consultation "Theology in the Life of Lutheran Churches – Transformative Perspectives and Practices," light candles during a morning prayer around the cross. © LWF/D.-M. Grötzsch

Concluding Consultation for LWF Theology in the Life of the Church Study Program

AUGSBURG/GENEVA (LWI) – In his opening address on 25 March at an international consultation of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) in Augsburg, Germany, Prof. Bernd Oberdorfer from the University of Augsburg said it was "an overwhelming experience" to see so many Lutherans from all over the world. "This displays in a wonderful way that the Lutheran church is a worldwide community," he remarked.

"Theology in the Life of Lutheran Churches: Transformative Perspectives and Practices Today," was the theme of the 25 to 31 March consultation, organized by the LWF Department for Theology and Studies (DTS) in cooperation with the Institute of Protestant Theology, University of Augsburg. Attended by around 120 theologians from over 30 countries, it was the concluding phase of a series of seminars and publications in the framework of the DTS study program "Theology in the Life of the Church," ongoing since 2004.

For Lutherans, coming to Augsburg in some sense means "coming home," Oberdorfer observed. In his welcoming address,

the theologian retraced the political and theological history of the city of Augsburg, with particular emphasis on the Reformation period. He said he felt the consultation offered a wonderful opportunity to search for "common answers to what it means to be Lutheran in the world of the 21st century."

DTS director Rev. Dr Karen Bloomquist described the Augsburg meeting as "probably the largest, and certainly the most diverse, gathering of theologians that the Lutheran World Federation has ever held." The challenge confronting contemporary theologians, she went on, was to truly practice theology within the Lutheran communion. One of the consultation's aims was to bring participants to "engage in genuinely mutual ways and to communicate with each other across contextual differences, and thus to work together in reconfiguring Lutheran theology for the future," she said.

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Thai Bishop Upama Calls for Strong Lutheran Communion

The head of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Thailand (ELCT) exhorted church members to focus on building a united, strong Lutheran communion in Thailand, which would include increasing membership and working toward financial self reliance.

Addressing delegates attending the 24-26 March ELCT general assembly in the central eastern province of Mukdahan, Bishop Visanukorn Upama said living in communion would not be easy, as "maintaining unity in one's own body itself [is] difficult." But "together we must fathom ways to live as a communion, challenging each other in working toward God's mission of creating a new world of justice, love and equality," he told the assembly meeting under the theme, "Serving the Lord in Unity."

Around 70 representatives from the church's 18 congregations and partner organizations attended the assembly. Delegates from the hill tribe churches in the northern province of Nan were par-

ticipating for the first time since the ELCT's inception in 1994. The need for self reliance was emphasized, with recommendations to increase financial support toward diocesan work.

The assembly agreed on an evangelism strategy to increase the ELCT membership from the current 3,000 to some 7,000 in the next three years. The bishop pointed out that while Christians were a meager one percent of Thailand's 63 million people, "we need to go out and spread the gospel with rejuvenated vigor so that it reaches the unreached." During the assembly, the Mukdahan Province Governor Mr Praneet Boonmee inaugurated a church center that will offer skills training and provide community support for people dealing with drug and alcohol addiction, those living with HIV, widows, orphaned children and the elderly.

(By Timothy Melvyn, communication officer for the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in India)

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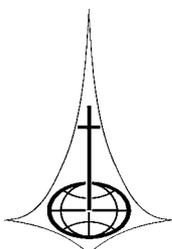
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New LWF Center Inaugurated in Wittenberg

German Bishop Underlines Significance for Fellowship and Reconciliation

WITTENBERG/GEVEVA (LWI) – A communion service celebrated in All Saints’ Church of Wittenberg, Germany, on 15 March marked the official opening of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) Center in this Reformation city. During the celebration, Bavarian Bishop Dr Johannes Friedrich, presiding bishop of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany (VELKD), installed Rev. Hans-Wilhelm Kasch as director of the new center, in the presence of LWF General Secretary Rev. Dr Ishmael Noko.

For Friedrich, the creation of the LWF Center in Wittenberg is “a contribution to the building of fellowship and reconciliation among Christian churches.” The task before the new center’s director was to be “a builder of bridges toward the world, creating strong bonds of trust among Christians everywhere.” It was an ecumenically-oriented task, he said, showing the way for Lutheran churches all over the world and for all Christians who have a stake in the Reformation.

VELKD last year designated the pastor for Mission and Ecumenism of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Mecklenburg, Rev. Hans-Wilhelm Kasch to be the director of the LWF Center in Wittenberg. By creating this position, which will be for an initial term of five years, the VELKD endeavors to support LWF’s work in Luther’s city.

The general secretary also stressed the central importance of the city of Wittenberg. In his sermon, Noko noted that the significance of the city was not rooted in the fame of the persons of



Official opening of the LWF Center in Wittenberg, Germany: (from left to right) Bavarian Bishop Dr Johannes Friedrich, LWF General Secretary Rev. Dr Ishmael Noko and Rev. Hans-Wilhelm Kasch. © Private

Martin Luther, Katherina von Bora or Philipp Melancthon, but rather in the initiatives that “led to the rediscovery of the gospel and the desire to renew the church of Jesus Christ.” He concluded by saying that the LWF was conscious of this commitment.

The numerous tasks of the new center include assistance to persons planning a theologically motivated stay in Wittenberg and making available opportunities to study Martin Luther’s theology at its source, especially for theologians from countries in which Luther studies are not readily accessible.

The VELKD bishop also announced that churches worldwide were being invited to take part in the “Luther Garden” project in Wittenberg, established for the 2017 Reformation jubilee, which would be a symbol of the fellowship and unity of all Chris-

tian churches. The project foresees the planting by partners and partner churches of 500 trees, of which the first will be planted on 1 November 2009.

Friedrich also indicated that the LWF Eleventh Assembly to be held in Stuttgart in July 2010, offered a special opportunity to visit Reformation sites in Germany, and Wittenberg in particular.

Friedrich, who is also chairperson of the LWF National Committee in Germany (GNC/LWF) underscored that the center’s work would closely interface with other activities of the city of Wittenberg, with the Center of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in Wittenberg, the Evangelische Wittenbergstiftung [Protestant Wittenberg Foundation], the Luther Memorials Foundation, and the Protestant Academy of Sachsen-Anhalt.

17 March 2009

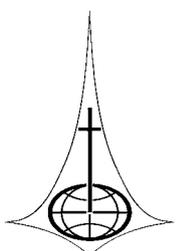
Historic Ecumenical Conference Seeks to Affirm Solidarity and Global Justice for Dalits

Representatives of Churches and Related Organizations Meet in Bangkok

GENEVA (LWI) – “The suffering and injustice experienced by millions of Dalit people and communities is a challenge

to the credibility of the churches’ affirmations of faith in India and worldwide,” according to Rev. Dr Deenabandhu

Manchala who heads the World Council of Churches (WCC) Just and Inclusive Communities Program. Manchala





Discriminatory work practices force Dalits to do for little or no pay any jobs considered “polluting” by dominant castes, such as preparing the dead for burial. This photo shows one such case in Bihar, India. © Jakob Carlsen

was speaking on the eve of the “Global Ecumenical Conference on Justice for Dalits” held from 21 to 24 March 2009 in Bangkok, Thailand, at the joint initiative of the WCC and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF).

Hosted by the Christian Conference of Asia, the conference brought together nearly 100 representatives of churches and church-related organizations from all over the world, with a significant representation from Indian churches and members of affected communities. The first of its kind, this global ecumenical event is intended to gather up experiences and perspectives on the challenge of securing justice for Dalits and similarly affected communities. It also provides a forum for articulating theological and ethical responses to the struggles of Dalits for survival and identity, focusing on the role of the global church family in relation to these struggles.

An estimated 260 million people in South Asia are Dalits, who are traditionally regarded as ‘untouchable’. This type of social convention can also be found in communities in many other parts of the world. It goes against every Christian, ethical and human rights perspective. “Untouchability and discrimination based on caste affect a significant proportion of the world’s people, and are a direct contradiction of the God-given dignity of every human being,” noted LWF Deputy General Secretary Rev. Chandran Paul Martin.

The Bangkok conference comes just one month before the United Nations ‘Durban Review Conference’, to be convened in Geneva from 20 to 24 April 2009, to review the implementation of the Plan of Action adopted by the 2001 World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance—in

which the problem of caste discrimination was not mentioned.

“The entire international community turned a blind eye to the plight of the world’s Dalits when they met in Durban, and they are set to do so again in Geneva in April,” said Mr Peter Prove of the LWF Office for International Affairs and Human Rights. The Bangkok conference organizers expect the churches of the world to take up the challenge that the governments of the world have refused to confront.

The churches in India have taken the issue of justice for Dalits as a core priority for their ongoing mission, and have been supported by the National Council of Churches in India, the WCC and LWF. These organizations have actively promoted the empowerment of Dalits in church and society by providing theological and ethical responses to the Dalit struggle, and in advocating the elimination of the centuries-old discrimination on the basis of caste. These ecumenical initiatives have also been instrumental in initiating many community-based programs for Dalit empowerment. Recent years have also seen a growing mobilization of civil society in India and elsewhere for Dalit human rights.

Representatives of Dalit social movements, national and international coalitions are also attending the Bangkok conference. The principal aim of this historic event is to affirm and strengthen the solidarity of the global ecumenical movement with the Indian churches and other organizations that are committed to the cause of justice for Dalits.

**Joint LWF/WCC press release.*

19 March 2009

World’s Churches Wrestle with the Ancient System of Caste Discrimination

LWF General Secretary Noko: Everyone Considered “Touchable” by God

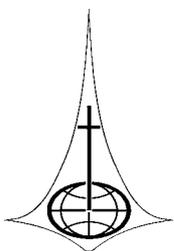
BANGKOK/GENEVA (LWI) – Recounting stories such as the alleged forced poisoning of a young couple, speakers at the Global Ecumenical Conference on Justice for Dalits which opened in Bangkok, Thailand, on 21 March gave a face to the 3,500-year-old system of caste-based discrimination, detailing

practices many would consider unthinkable in the 21st century.

Shortly after their wedding on 5 May 2003, S. Murugesan (25), and D. Kannagi (22), both college graduates from Puthukkooraipeetti village in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, were allegedly forced to drink poisonous

liquid in the presence of scores of people, who witnessed the couple’s agony. The bodies were burnt, leaving no evidence of the gruesome incident.

This real-life Romeo and Juliet story happened because Murugesan was a Dalit while Kannagi was a Vanniyar with low caste status.



Under Hindu doctrine, Dalits are considered “polluted” and “polluting” and hence, “untouchable.” Not even included in the bottom tier of the caste system, they cannot intermarry, even with those from the lowest caste.

In another case a five-year-old girl D. Dhanam lost her vision in one eye after being beaten by a school teacher in Kattinaicken village in Tamil Nadu’s Salem district. Her mistake: she had taken water from a tumbler kept exclusively for upper-caste children.

These were two of many examples Bishop Dr Vedanayagam Devasahayam of the Church of South India, Madras Diocese, cited from detailed accounts of “systemic violence” against Dalits compiled by Indian journalist Soumya Viswanathan.

The stories helped to give “theological and missiological bases” upon which 95 representatives and leaders of various churches and organizations worldwide could affirm their solidarity with the Dalits during the 21–24 March conference.

International Solidarity

LWF General Secretary Rev. Dr Ishmael Noko expressed his empathy with the long suffering of the Dalits, recalling how the majority of people in his own region of Southern Africa had suffered institutionalized discrimination.

“I can imagine a little of how it is to be born a Dalit and to be the subject of entrenched discrimination based on descent and traditional occupation,” Noko wrote in a statement read out on his behalf at the conference. “As a Zimbabwean, I also know what it is like for promises and hopes of justice and a better life to be unfulfilled or betrayed.”

Noting how Dalit communities continue to suffer “despite many noble words in constitutional guarantees and legislative provisions,” Noko strongly criticized perpetrators and accomplices of discrimination.

“Governments that exclude a whole section of [their] own citizens—or allow them to be so treated—are incompetent to govern,” he said. “And members of the international community that know

but ignore the issue are accomplices to the systemic violations of human rights resulting from this unjust system.”

Noting how the international community abandoned the plea of the Dalits for recognition of their human rights during the 2001 United Nations World Conference against racism in Durban, South Africa, Noko stressed that the churches of the world must not turn a blind eye to the Dalits’ suffering.

“As churches, we confess that we are all members of the one body of Christ, the whole body sharing in the pain of just one of its members,” he added. “Can any part of the body of Christ be considered ‘untouchable’? Everyone is ‘touchable’ by God. No one can be excluded from the means of grace.”

The church in India, Noko said, has “a Dalit face.” He explained that members of Lutheran churches in India are predominantly from Dalit and tribal communities. Of the 27 million Christians in India, approximately 20 million are Dalits.



Bishop Vedanayagam Devasahayam, Church of South India © LWF/WCC/Maurice Malanes

“As long as Dalits are not treated with dignity and justice, then all human dignity is at risk,” Noko stressed.

The Indian Constitution bans “discrimination by caste” and the practice of “untouchability.” Two special laws seek to punish perpetrators of caste discrimination, while others prohibit forced labor, manual scavenging and *jogni* (ritual prostitution). More than 22 national develop-

ment schemes seek to improve the economic lot of Dalits.

Much remains to be desired, however, from these constitutional guarantees and legislations, said Rev. Vincent Manoharan of the National Campaign for Dalit Rights, an independent human rights watchdog.

Responding to the question of the Dalits’ hopes, Bishop Devasahayam, a Dalit himself, said: “We want the Indian government to acknowledge the existence of caste-based discrimination and the practice of untouchability.”

He also urged the Indian government to study how state machinery functions, particularly its “failure to render justice for the Dalits through the police, executive and judiciary.”

Devasahayam also took the Indian church to task. “We want the Indian church to acknowledge and confess the sin of harboring the caste system within its ranks and programs.”

At the Bangkok conference, non-Indian participants learned that some Indian churches also practice exclusion, with some even having separate entrances for Dalits. Leadership positions in the church, they heard, were dominated by non-Dalit men.

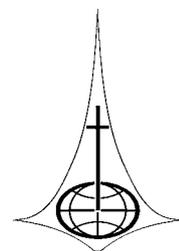
“We want the Indian church to declare its identity as the church of and for the Dalits, in order to work towards their liberation,” said Devasahayam. “We also want the Indian church to encourage the expression of the Dalit culture in church life, worship and theology.”

Rev. Dr Park Seong-Won of Youngnam Theological University and Seminary, South Korea, spoke for many church leaders around the world, embracing the Dalits’ cause during the first morning worship service: “The Dalit issue is also our issue. Until the Dalits are totally liberated, are we ready to say: ‘I am Dalit, too?’”

(Contribution by Ecumenical News International [ENI] correspondent Maurice Malanes)

More information about the conference is available at http://www.lutheranworld.org/What_We_Do/Olahr/OIAHR-Dalit_Justice.html

26 March 2009



LWF CONSULTATION "THEOLOGY IN THE LIFE OF LUTHERAN CHURCHES"
 25-31 March in Augsburg, Germany

Theologians Deliberate Perspectives Reshaping Contemporary Lutheran Theology

Continued from p. 1

In his opening presentation, Dr Hans-Peter Grosshans, professor of systematic theology at the University of Münster, Germany, affirmed, "I want to argue that perhaps there is not the *one* Lutheran perspective all over the world, but that there is *one* theological endeavor which binds and holds Lutherans together all over the world."

Grosshans, DTS Study Secretary for Theology and the Church at the Geneva secretariat from September 2007 through September 2008, said there was a common way of dealing theologically with the problems at hand and of encountering the respective cultures.

More information on the LWF/DTS consultation "Theology in the Life of



Opening of the LWF/DTS consultation "Theology in the Life of Lutheran Churches – Transformative Perspectives and Practices" on 25 March in Augsburg (from left to right: Prof. Bernd Oberdorfer, Rev. Dr. Karen Bloomquist and Prof. Hans-Peter Grosshans. © University of Augsburg/Klaus Satzinger-Viel

Lutheran Churches: Transformative Perspectives and Practices Today" is available at www.lutheranworld.org/

[What_We_Do/DTS/DTS-TLC_Augsburg.html](http://www.lutheranworld.org/What_We_Do/DTS/DTS-TLC_Augsburg.html)

27 March 2009

Augsburg Mayor Welcomes Participants to the City of Ecumenism

The deputy mayor of Augsburg Mr Hermann Weber said it was "a special honor" to welcome participants of the LWF international consultation to the city.

Weber welcomed the delegates on 25 March in the city's town hall, on behalf of the Lord Mayor Dr Kurt Gribl.

Augsburg's past is intimately intertwined



Augsburg deputy mayor Hermann Weber © LWF/D.-M. Grötzsch

with the history of the church and with that of both Catholics and Lutherans, Weber observed. From this past, he said, "we have inherited responsibilities for the future." As a result, Augsburg could rightly be considered itself as the city of ecumenism, especially because it was there, on 31 October 1999,

that the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification was signed by the LWF and the Roman Catholic Church.

Ecumenism was even a feature of the urban landscape, according to Weber, for it was common in Augsburg to see Protestant and Roman Catholic churches standing side by side. He described it as a great honor for the city of Augsburg that, in the year of the tenth anniversary of the signing of the Joint Declaration, theologians from all over the world were gathering there to explore "new perspectives" for Lutheran theology.

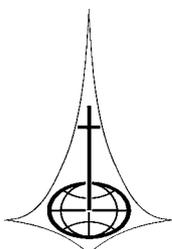
Reformation Jubilee in 2017 Must Have Clear Ecumenical Dimension

The bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hanover, Germany, Dr Margot Kässmann issued a strong plea to "give the jubilee of

the Reformation a clear ecumenical dimension."

In one of the main presentations at the LWF consultation in Augsburg

on 26 March, Kässmann insisted that, despite their disagreements and their specific identities, the Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches have more



things in common than things that separate them.

“In a secular society, a common witness of Christians is of eminent importance,” the Hannover bishop told consultation participants. The closer the church is in its presentations to the public, the better it is listened to as a church, she said.

With regard to the 2017 Reformation jubilee, Kässmann said it was extremely important that the event is used as an opportunity for critical reflection. “I am convinced [that] the



Bishop Dr Margot Kässmann © LWF/D.-M. Grötzsch

churches of the Reformation in Germany, as well as Lutheran churches worldwide, are strong enough not to blind out the dark sides of their great founder,” Kässmann explained.

She affirmed the “Bible is the focal point of reference for the Reformation.” For this reason, she said she hoped that during preparations for the Reformation jubilee, fresh orientation from the Bible will be sought out. She said she also hoped that Christians, in Europe especially, would once again find a common language.

Church Must Focus Involvement on Injustice, Hunger and Poverty

In the future, the worldwide Lutheran communion must make overcoming injustice, hunger and poverty the central focus of its action, emphasized Bishop Dr Margot Kässmann of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hannover, during a press conference on 26 March in Augsburg, Germany.

Kässmann said the theological consultation and the LWF Eleventh Assembly to be held in Stuttgart, Germany, in July 2010 would contribute to a broadening of horizons on the eve of the 2017 Reformation jubilee. She termed the Assembly theme, “Give

Us Today Our Daily Bread” as both a “theological and political” challenge.

“Lutheran churches should focus together on the transformation within the worldwide communion,” insisted LWF/DTS director, Rev. Dr Karen Bloomquist. According to Bloomquist, Lutheranism had undergone considerable change since 1517. For the sake of the future of the Lutheran church, strengthening the connections between theology and the life of the church was of paramount importance, she said.

According to Dr Bernd Oberdorfer, who holds the chair of Protestant theol-

ogy at the University of Augsburg, the consultation, from an academic point of view, was of great significance for the worldwide Lutheran communion, in particular because it clearly brought out the multiple dimensions of Lutheran theology. He said the forum was a unique opportunity to explore what ties Lutherans to the roots of the past and what new avenues of future reflection and action could be traced.

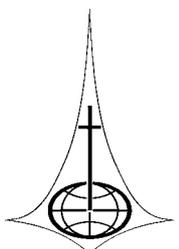
For Rev. Dr Guillermo Hansen, currently associate professor of systematic theology at the Luther Seminary in St Paul, Minnesota, USA, the Augsburg gathering “makes the worldwide network of Lutheran theologians visible.” This meeting was an exceptional opportunity for theologians from all over the world to come face to face in order to dialogue, the Argentinian noted.

“To be in Augsburg is spiritually and theologically a homecoming for me,” said Prof. Ramathate Dolamo of South Africa. In addition, the consultation has a future perspective, because it offers the possibility to better define the Lutheran self-understanding. “As theologians, we must respond to the needs of the congregations,” the theology professor pointed out. For this reason, the theological debate at the meeting is of fundamental importance.



Opening press conference (from left to right): Prof. Ramathate Dolamo, Rev. Dr Guillermo Hansen, Rev. Dr Karen Bloomquist, Dirk-Michael Grötzsch from the LWF Office for Communication Services, Bishop Dr Margot Kässmann and Prof. Bernd Oberdorfer © University of Augsburg/Klaus Satzinger-Viel

More LWI News at
www.lutheranworld.org/News/Welcome.EN.html



Lutheran Theology Alive and Well

“Lutheran theology today is alive and well,” underlined Rev. Dr Guillermo Hansen on 26 March, addressing about 120 participants at the LWF/DTS international consultation. This theology was alive because it came from such diverse environments, said the Argentine theologian, currently teaching at Luther Seminary in St Paul, Minnesota, USA.



Rev. Dr Guillermo Hansen
© LWF/D.-M. Gröttsch

The diversity of Lutheran theology is the best indicator that “Lutheran identity is not static, but always becoming,” according to Hansen. In his view, “the web of belief is enriched” when we have to deal with reverence for ancestors, speaking in tongues, healing practices or HIV and AIDS. “Participation in this Lutheran web makes all of us not only custodians, but receptors,” Hansen added.



Prof. Ramathate Dolamo
© LWF/D.-M. Gröttsch

“The indigenization of the church in Africa should deal with issues such

as ritual, religion, myth, liturgy, prayer and worship while inculturation of the gospel should deal with issues such as culture, morality, ethos, taboos, theology and praxis,” stated Dr Ramathate Dolamo from South Africa, in one of the main lectures.

The concepts of indigenization and inculturation are still widely regarded as synonyms, he claimed. Yet “a fine distinction” could be drawn between the two concepts

“without necessarily tearing them apart.”

Interreligious dialogue is the necessary prerequisite

for doing theology in religiously pluralist contexts, emphasized Dr J. Paul Rajashekar, currently teaching at Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA. “The focus of dialogue, among other things, is to engage in mutual theological discoveries that strengthen our faith in relation to other faiths in diverse contexts,” added the Indian theologian.



Dr J. Paul Rajashekar
© LWF/D.-M. Gröttsch

Interacting with other religions is not about being right, stressed Dr Eva Harasta, an Austrian lecturer in systematic theology at Bamberg University in Germany. In her view, “It is about trusting Christ’s actions and about being his witnesses, about getting to know him. Backed by the strength of the resurrection, this endeavor is not dispirited—it is an endeavor filled with hope and trust,” she explained.



Dr Eva Harasta
© LWF/D.-M. Gröttsch

Closing Gap between Academic Theology and Church Life

“The place where you are gathered—the city of Augsburg—fits well with the topic of your theological consultation,” said Oberkirchenrat Michael Martin, director of the department for ecumenism and church life of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria.

Martin made these remarks when he welcomed participants of the LWF global consultation on behalf of Bavarian Bishop Dr Johannes Friedrich.



Oberkirchenrat Michael Martin
© LWF/D.-M. Gröttsch

Speaking at a reception organized by the Bavarian church, Martin said the task “of this consultation is to close the gap between academic theology and church life.” This could be achieved by “examining the changes in theological work in different local contexts of Lutheran theology in the 21st century.” Addressing this issue is “essential for the communion of Lutheran churches within the LWF,” he added.

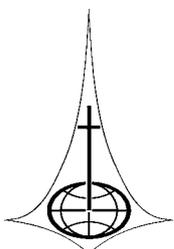
He announced the Bavarian church would celebrate its 200th anniversary this year. A further highlight in 2009 would be the tenth anniversary of the 31 October 1999 signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. “Together with the LWF, the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the World Methodist Council [which formally affirmed the Joint Declaration in July 2006], we want to remember this very important step on our way to the unity of the one church, to which we all belong,” added Martin.

Marginal Readings of Bible Help Discern New Way of Being Church

“In our day-to-day work of theologizing we hardly take seriously the concerns of our partners from different contexts,” emphasized Dr Monica J.

Melanchthon, professor at Gurukul Lutheran Theological College in Chennai, India, on 27 March in Augsburg, Germany.

Speaking to some 120 participants at the Lutheran World Foundation (LWF) consultation “Theology in the Life of Lutheran Churches



– Transformative Perspectives and Practices,” Melanchthon explored the topic “Marginal Readings: Implications for the Lutheran Communion.”

“The first and foremost issue that is central to marginal readings of the Bible is the context of the interpreter,” Melanchthon claimed. “These readings challenge the community to discern a new way of being church,” she added. It is important to realize that “theologians are called to see the revelation of God shining in the faces of others, those who are different.”

How biblical theology can be made more relevant for the life of Lutheran churches all over the world was the issue taken up by Rev. Dr Fidon Mwombeki, general secretary of the United Evangelical Mission (VEM) in Wuppertal, Germany, in a lecture on 27 March.

In Mwombeki’s opinion, the hermeneutic of resonance is the best way of making biblical theology relevant



Prof. Monica J. Melanchthon
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worldwide. “But biblical theology can be relevant only if it is resonant with the text, with the confessions, with the aspirations and identity of the church as well as with the sociocultural situation of the readers,” the Tanzanian theologian stated.

In a keynote lecture, Rev. Dr Dean Zweck from the Australian Lutheran College in Adelaide, Australia, asserted that “in the light of the gospel, our theology and practice, our faith and life, can be deeply enriched and made more relevant as we hear one another interpret the Bible in our different contexts in the unique global communion of faith in which we as Lutherans belong.”



Rev. Dr Fidon Mwombeki
© LWF/D.-M. Gröttsch



Rev. Dr Dean Zweck
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At the same time, Zweck insisted, this will mean encountering not only “affirmation and appropriation, but sometimes also refutation. This calls for wisdom, for discerning what God wants to give us not only in God’s word, but also in God’s world.”

In her presentation on the topic “Diversity in the Bible as a Model for Lutheran Hermeneutics,” Prof. Barbara Rossing from the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Illinois, USA, argued that “diversity in the Bible is a great treasure that we very much need for mission and ministry today.”



Prof. Barbara Rossing
© LWF/D.-M. Gröttsch

Rossing stressed that “when responsible biblical scholars disagree” perhaps the crucial question was “whether and on what issues diversity must be church-dividing.” She argued that scholars “have not been persuasive in making the case that canonical diversity can be a blessing for people in the pews.”

Everyone Needs Bread for Daily Life



Rev. Susanne Kasch, dean of the Augsburg Evangelical Lutheran Church District, presides at the 29 March Holy Communion service in St Anne’s Church, Augsburg.
© LWF/D.-M. Gröttsch



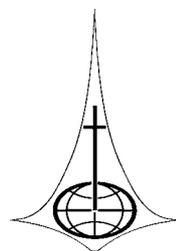
Consultation participants follow the service in St Anne’s Church.
© LWF/D.-M. Gröttsch

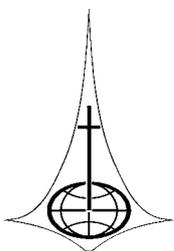
Cameroonian church leader Rev. Dr Thomas Nyiwe summarized the key focus of the LWF consultation as “a strong conviction that there needs to be a strong connection between our task of theologizing and the

preaching and mission of our congregations.”

In his sermon during the 29 March Holy Communion service in Augsburg’s St Anne’s Church, Nyiwe, president of the Evangeli-

cal Lutheran Church of Cameroon testified: “I have seen Jesus in my life. He has redeemed me. He has transformed my life.” Consequently, he added, the consultation “needs to look at the risen Jesus who does have





the power to transform our lives and world.”

“Every one of us needs bread—or its equivalent, such as rice—to sustain his or her daily life,” Nyiwe stated in reference to the LWF Eleventh Assembly theme, “Give Us Today Our Daily Bread.” The highest decision making body of the LWF will meet from 20 to 27 July 2010 in Stuttgart, Germany.

“Many people of Africa,” said Nyiwe, “are enduring horrific human tragedies such as civil war, famine, genocide HIV and AIDS, poverty, corruption, ethnicity, etc.” He ex-

pressed his deep conviction that the answer to these difficult situations would come from the power of Christian prayer. “God in Christ is faithful and therefore ready to give us our daily bread every day of our life,” he affirmed.

“Ten years ago, the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification was signed here in St Anne’s Church,” recalled Rev. Susanne



Rev. Dr. Thomas Nyiwe
© LWF/D.-M. Grätzsch

Kasch, dean of the Augsburg Evangelical Lutheran Church District, at the start of the service, remarkable for its wealth of music. Discussing the future of the Lutheran communion was most important, and it was also a significant occasion to meet with Lutherans from all over the world for worship on this Sunday, she added.

Relationship with God Does Not End at Death

“Hell, if it exists, is temporal, not eternal,” claimed Rev. Dr. Kristin Johnston Largen, associate professor of systematic theology at Lutheran Theological Seminary in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, USA.

“If Christ has gone even there, to the deepest pit of existence, what of ‘hell’ is left?” Johnston Largen challenged 120 theologians on 28 March at the LWF consultation.

Her presentation explored the relationship between creation and salvation, and the ramifications of that relationship for Christian eschatological thinking, particularly as it pertains to



Prof. Kristin Johnston Largen
© LWF/D.-M. Grätzsch

non-Christians. She summed up her position in three central affirmations: “First, God is the creator of all; second, God is in a loving relationship with all; and third, that re-

lationship does not end at death.” Ultimately, she claimed, “the very fact of God’s relationship with creation is salvific.”

“In Christ, God is conjoining all creatures and takes part in the very biological tissue of creation,” un-



Prof. Niels Henrik Gregersen
© LWF/D.-M. Grätzsch

derlined Dr Niels Henrik Gregersen from the Theological Faculty of Copenhagen University, Denmark. “God becomes Jesus, and in him God becomes human, sparrow, and grass, soil.” Moreover, Gregersen said, the most high and the very lowest are united in the process of incarnation that “signifies coming-into-flesh, so that God the creator, and the world of the flesh are conjoined in Jesus Christ.”

In an interactive plenary session on “Integrative theological Formation” Rev. Dr. Norma Cook Everist from Wartburg Theological Seminary in



Prof. Norma Cook Everist (photo left) gives instructions for small group discussions, (photo right) during the interactive plenary. © LWF/D.-M. Grätzsch

Dubuque, Iowa, USA, asserted that “transformative theology connects not only with our minds, but also with our hands and hearts.”

Cook Everist facilitated the session in small group discussions to

help participants identify existential issues in their own churches and deliberate how to do theology inductively beginning with daily life. “Using integrative approaches [does not mean] that we need specific theo-

logical disciplines less but that we need them more.” These disciplines ought to constantly interact and thus “mutually inform and transform people in our theological schools and churches,” she stated.

Religion and Spirituality Transform People

In her presentation titled “Marked by the Body of Christ: A Lutheran Approach to Practices,” Dr Martha Ellen Stortz of the Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley, California, USA, explained that religion and spirituality do not do something *for* people, but rather, do something *to* people, by directing attention to God.



Prof. Martha Ellen Stortz
© LWF/D.-M. Gröttsch

“Both religion and spirituality are, finally, about God,” Stortz told participants in the LWF consultation.

She pointed out that German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminded her how easily the practice of any religion could lose heart when it lost its bearings. When this happens, she said, religious practices become “empty actions, soulless and disembodied.” As a result, people, because of their “longing to be marked,” seek meaning elsewhere. In contrast to all attempts to achieve in other ways this feeling of being marked, “Christians can offer another alternative—the marked body of Christ, for we are that body,” stressed Stortz.



Rev. Lisandro Orlov
© LWF/D.-M. Gröttsch

with people living with HIV. The word “stigma” in this context takes on a totally different meaning, ac-

ording to Orlov, as HIV is a reality that challenges theology. “When we embrace the margins of all stigmas, we are changing our way of being community because we open ourselves in all our vulnerability to the one who is different, strange and [a] foreigner,” he observed.

“The event that I name as traumatic is the Christ event,” said Rev. Dr Dirk G. Lange, associate professor of worship at Luther

Responding to Stortz’s presentation, Rev. Lisandro Orlov, head of the HIV and AIDS project “Pastoral EcuMénica VIH y SIDA” in Buenos Aires, Argentina, said her paper’s focus had re-kindled memories of his work



Prof. Dirk G. Lange
© LWF/D.-M. Gröttsch

Seminary in St Paul, Minnesota, USA. In his presentation, Lange explained that this traumatic event could not be fully grasped, but could be remem-

bered, repeated and, therefore, ritualized. Worship, he said, embodied a force that could never be purely and definitively repeated. While ceremonies and rites were given, even handed down from generation to generation, they required a continual work of pastoral discernment, to “allow the Spirit to irrupt in every context, in every heart, leading to faith and fear and finally to prayer,” he explained.

Why had Lange applied the trauma theory and not the victory theory to the Christ event, posed Rev. Dr Samuel Wilfred of Sabah Theological Seminary in Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia, in his response to Lange’s presentation. Wilfred called for the informed participation and commitment of everyone in shaping worship. “Worship helps us to look at the suffering of others and prompts us to do something,” he asserted.



Rev. Dr Samuel Wilfred John
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African Theology of Sustainable Development Heeds the People’s Voices

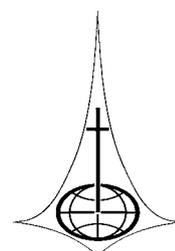
In his presentation at the LWF consultation, Tanzanian Bishop Dr Benson Kalikawe Bagonza explained a theological approach that initially addresses questions genuinely raised by the real context, rather than merely dealing with issues emanating from the Christian tradition in the past.



Bishop Dr Benson Kalikawe Bagonza © LWF/D.-M. Gröttsch

“By starting with questions raised by the people, the African theology of sustainable development initiates a dialogue with the Christian tradition,” said Bagonza, head of the Karagwe Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT).

“The African theology of sustainable development heeds the voices of ordinary people within Africa and outside Africa,” according to the ELCT bishop. It involves raising questions posed by people, rather than projecting the agenda of professional theologians or church leaders. In this way, precisely those who yearn for the solution of this ongoing dilemma will be heard, he told participants.



In his presentation titled “Public Statements of German Protestant Churches on Peace and Conflict Issues,” Prof. Bernd Oberdorfer, chairperson of Protestant theology at the University of Augsburg, gave an example of how a pluralistic church comes to terms with controversial ethical issues and, at the same time, contributes to public debates within a pluralistic society. The role model of the public mission of the church obviously cannot be transferred with-



Prof. Bernd Oberdorfer
© LWF/D.-M. Grätzsch

out qualification to other cultural contexts, he explained. In the German context, it helped the Protestant churches to play an active role in society instead of shirking their responsibility, according to Oberdorfer.

“Luther’s public theology of God’s publicity might help us today to imagine global civil society as God’s preferential

arena for prophetic speech, sapiential reflection, and pacific action, and for the public church vocation of public companions with God in global civil society,” suggested Prof. Gary Simpson of Luther Seminary in St Paul, Minnesota, USA.



Prof. Gary Simpson
© LWF/D.-M. Grätzsch

According to Simpson, publicity together with solidarity form the core dynamic of the emerging age of global civil society and its democratizing ethos are relative to both the political state and market economy.

Lutherans Everywhere Are Inheritors of the Reformation



The many faces of the Lutheran communion today: Around 120 Theologians from all over the world participated in the LWF/DTS consultation “Theology in the Life of Lutheran Churches – Transformative Perspectives and Practices” 25–31 March in Augsburg, Germany. © LWF/D.-M. Grätzsch

The Reformation will go on for as long as a bold spirit breathes life into the body of the communion, said Prof. Vitor Westhelle of the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, USA, summing up his impressions of the week-long LWF international consultation in Augsburg, Germany.

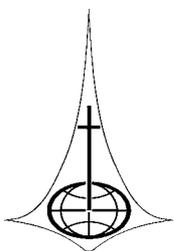
Speaking on 31 March before some 120 participants attending the consul-

tation, Westhelle said, “We are truly inheritors of the Reformation, not only by the content of its theological formulations, but above all, by the audacious spirit exhaling through the movement.”

Within the reformation movement, speaking *as* church and speaking *to* the church became a “crossing—the community of the cross in its feeble, unstable, and weak (re)formation,” he said.

Referring to discussions at the consultation, Westhelle said, “This spirit was described as the tense encounter between the voice that speaks as church and the one that speaks to church, and for the people breathing life into the body of the communion.”

The church community straddles the uncertain ground between church and the challenges of its task. The





Plenary session of the LWF/DTS consultation, end of March in Augsburg, Germany © University of Augsburg/Klaus Satzinger-Viel



Delegates exchange experiences during the international conference. © LWF/D.-M. Gröttsch

church must at one and the same time be a teaching church that speaks authoritatively and a learning church, in the sense of a church that can be addressed and in that way, corrected, he explained. “Theology in the Life of Lutheran Churches: Transformative Perspectives and Practices Today,” was the theme of the consultation jointly organized by the LWF Department for Theology and Studies (DTS) and the Institute of Protestant Theology of the University of Augsburg.

Pointing to the connection to future theological discussions, Westhelle noted, “By its very nature, conversation, if it is true conversation, is always an event that ends in a deficit, and in this deficit lies the key to the understanding of what needs still to be talked about.” If such deficits did not exist, it would not be a conversation. He explained that as the Augsburg meeting proceeded, it became evident that theological issues such as interfaith dialogue, ethical questions and human sexuality, needed

to be explored more deeply in future dialogues and consultations.

Speaking to *LWI*, Prof. Bernd Oberdorfer, who holds the chair of Protestant theology at the University of Augsburg, said, “The consultation, by providing new insights for fostering closer fellowship among the world’s Lutheran churches, marks a promising step forward.”

To come together with Lutherans from all over the world and thus recognize that the Lutheran tradition transcends all differences was a genuinely horizon-expanding experience, said Oberdorfer. “It is encouraging to see that despite our great diversity, we speak a common language and this language will enable us to tackle the same issues,” he remarked.

For LWF/DTS director, Rev. Dr Karen Bloomquist, “This event was a historic gathering of working together

in new ways on the future of Lutheran theology, especially in those areas where churches are spreading in numbers and deepening their appreciation of Lutheran insights.”



Prof. Vitor Westhelle © LWF/D.-M. Gröttsch

Bloomquist said the theological conversations during the consultation, were intense, and cut across many boundaries and differences. As one participant had aptly commented, “what binds us together is not necessarily that we think in the same way, but that we are able to continue talking together through the networks that began here,” she added.

The main presentations are available in English as PDF files on the LWF Web site at:

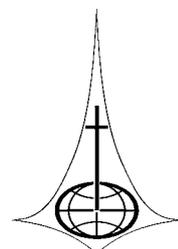
www.lutheranworld.org/What_We_Do/DTS/TLC_Augsburg/Presentations.html



Delegates join in the 31 March closing worship service of the international LWF/DTS consultation in Augsburg. © LWF/D.-M. Gröttsch



Rev. Simone Sinn who has been serving as DTS theological associate since 2006, preached at the closing worship. © LWF/D.-M. Gröttsch



Internship with the Lutheran World Federation Can Change a Life

Church Universe Has Expanded For Augsburg Dean and Zambian Pastor

GENEVA (LWI) – Nearly 30 years ago, Rev. Susanne Kasch was the first woman theologian to complete an internship with the Department for Theology and Studies (DTS) of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF).

“My stay at the Lutheran World Federation and in Geneva broadened my horizons incredibly,” remarks Kasch looking back on her November 1979 to August 1980 stint in the secretariat of the global church communion. “My knowledge of the world expanded. I learned a lot.” At present she is dean of the Augsburg Evangelical Lutheran Church District and pastor of Augsburg’s St Anne’s Church.

“During my internship at the Lutheran World Federation, I learned to look beyond the confines of my regional church to discover the roots of the worldwide Lutheran communion,” the church leader said. To her view, an important outcome of her internship was learning how other churches around the world are structured. Coming into contact with Lutheran theologians from Africa, Asia and America radically changed her way of thinking and her approach to dialogue.

She speaks enthusiastically about her experiences of almost three decades ago. She benefited especially from her encounters with people from all over the world. “An internship with the Lutheran World Federation can change a life,” Kasch affirms.

She sees the LWF consultation “Theology in the Life of Lutheran Churches: Transformative Perspectives and Practices Today,” currently taking place in Augsburg, as a platform for similar transformative experiences.

As dean of the city church district, Kasch has been charged with the task



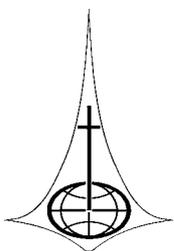
Meeting in Augsburg’s St Anne’s Church: Rev. Susanne Kasch (left), dean of the Augsburg Evangelical Lutheran Church District, LWF intern from 1979 to August 1980, and current DTS intern Rev. Rolita Machila (right) from Zambia. © LWF/D.-M. Grötzsch

of welcoming the many theologians and stakeholders from around the world and dialoguing with them. Her hope has been that the participants feel at home in Augsburg and engage in lively discussions about the relevance of Lutheran theology in the contemporary world.

Kasch notes that at the LWF she “came into contact with liberation

theology and feminist approaches that opened new theological depths for me.” In her pastoral praxis, she continues to benefit from her contextual experience in Geneva.

Dean Kasch recalls as particularly meaningful the atmosphere at multi-confessional worship in the Ecumenical Center. Duty travel, too, gave her the opportunity to observe firsthand



how Christians throughout the world belong together and how those who need support are strengthened.

Rev. Rolita Machila (26) of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zambia has had a similar horizon-expanding experience as a DTS intern. "I will return to my home church as a theologically and interculturally enriched pastor," she comments. Machila has served at the LWF Secretariat since January 2008.

She finds being with the LWF a very intense endeavor, offering opportunities to deepen knowledge. "I am meeting people from many parts of the world and discussing with them issues that are currently relevant in their churches," Machila said. The work of the LWF inspires her to practice theology from an ecumenical standpoint and to incorporate the global perspective of the Lutheran communion in her future pastoral ministry.

During her time at the LWF Secretariat, Machila is focusing on the theological aspects of climate change. Her internship will end in May 2009.

(Based on interviews with Dean Kasch and Rev. Machila conducted by Claudia Schubert of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hanover. Schubert spent an 11-month internship in the LWF Office for Communication Services.)

31 March 2009

FEATURE: She Could Not Share Dogs' Water

Education Helps Dalit Woman Find Her Strength

BANGKOK, Thailand/GENEVA (LWI)

– Rama Devi Hansraj comes from Bhubaneswar, the capital of India's northeastern state of Orissa. She may not have experienced removing human excrement from dry toilets with bare hands, a task assigned to Dalits like her, who were once called "untouchables".

But Hansraj, aged 28, says she knows what it means to be considered below India's caste system. Growing up as a child of Hindu parents, she had to remember not to drink water from a tumbler reserved for upper caste children. The penalty was to face beatings from upper-caste teachers.

Hansraj learned early on that cattle, dogs and pigs could bathe in a pond intended exclusively for *kallars* (non-Dalits). But a Dalit like her could not bathe in the same water.

She was one of 95 representatives of churches and other organizations worldwide who participated in a 21-24 March conference in Bangkok, Thailand, organized by the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation, and hosted by the Christian Conference of Asia.

The conference aimed to raise awareness of caste-based discrimination ahead of the 20 to 24 April United Nations' Durban Review Conference, to be convened in Geneva, to review the implementation of the Plan of Action adopted by the 2001 World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban,



Ms Rama Devi Hansraj from Orissa, India
© Private

South Africa. In Bangkok, delegates urged governments taking part in the Durban review conference to "accept the inclusion of caste-based discrimination" in their discussions.

Practical Reasons

Despite facing such discrimination at home, Hansraj remained a Hindu for some time due to practical reasons. "As a Hindu, I could avail myself of the government's affirmative action programs," she said in an interview with this writer during the ecumenical conference.

In 1950, India's Hindu Dalits were made eligible for free education and reserved government jobs to improve

their social status. Such benefits were extended to Sikh Dalits in 1956 and then to Buddhist Dalits in 1990. However, Christian Dalits who account for two thirds of some 27 million Christians in India, as well as Muslim Dalits, are denied these rights.

Through the affirmative action programs, Hansraj received an education and eventually qualified for an international fellowship at the University of London, United Kingdom, where she took a master's degree in human rights.

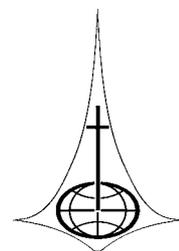
Globalizing Opportunities

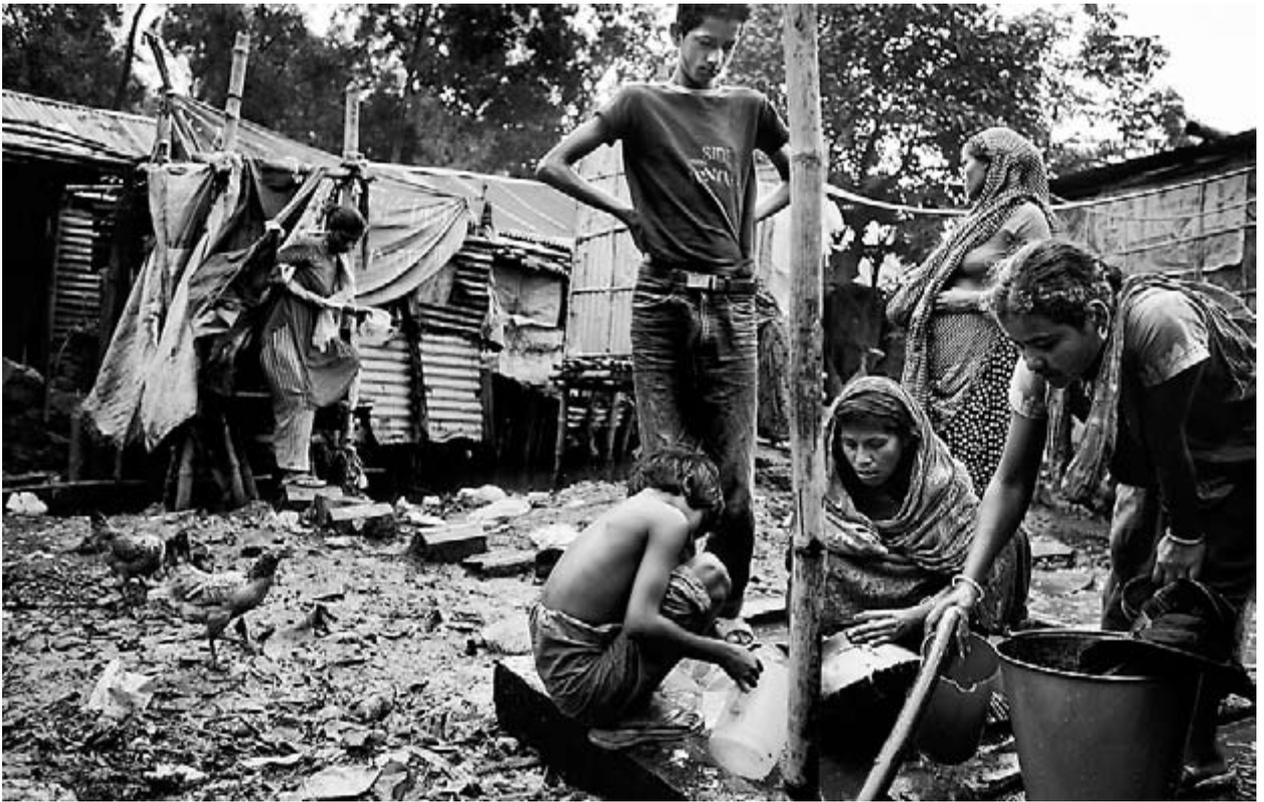
Subsequently Hansraj converted to Buddhism. Since 2006, she has been working for the aid organization Catholic Relief Services in India, where she has collaborated with Christian churches in Dalit rights' advocacy.

As an aid worker, Hansraj has helped in rebuilding the lives of Dalit Christians in India's troubled Orissa state, where thousands of Christians were attacked by Hindu extremists in 2008.

"Besides helping build homes, we are also helping psychologically and spiritually rehabilitate the people, especially the children who have remained traumatized by the violence in Orissa," she said.

To Hansraj, a mother of two and the wife of a Baptist minister, also a Dalit, education represents a major step in the journey to Dalit liberation. She stressed that amid the Dalits' difficulties and suffering, education could help





Pangu PWD Sweeper Colony, Agargaon, Dhaka, Bangladesh, September 2007: Sweeping the streets is a dirty job and Dhaka's sweepers are mainly Dalits, confined to slums such as this one set up by their employer, the Public Works Department (PWD). Some 500 people live here in 98 extremely small shacks without safe drinking water, electricity, special health care facilities or schools in the neighborhood. © Jakob Carlsen

empower them and turn their position of "victimhood" into one of strength.

She currently attends evening classes at a law school in Chennai, southeastern India, where she is a first-year student. "My human rights education and law background would help me in my advocacy for Dalit justice and rights," she said.

"Besides education, globalization—not in the sense of globalizing markets but in globalizing opportunities—can one day help make caste-based discrimination a thing of the past," she added.

(Adapted from Maurice Malanes' feature article for the Geneva-based Ecumenical News International.)

***The article is in the continuing LWI features' series focusing on the topic "Give Us Today Our Daily Bread," the theme of the LWF Eleventh Assembly, which will take place 20–27 July 2010 in Stuttgart, Germany.**

15 April 2009

Brazilian Lutheran Pastor Giese to Head Regional Ecumenical Council

Brazilian Lutheran pastor **Rev. Nilton Giese**, has been named as the new general secretary of the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI), following the resignation of its previous top official in 2008. He was elected during CLAI's 19 to 22 March board of directors meeting in Lima, Peru. In addition to his current work as CLAI's communication director, Giese, 49, has been acting general secretary since February 2008.

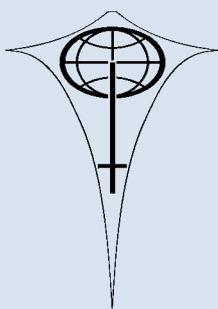
A member of the Evangelical Church of the Lutheran Confession in Brazil, Giese studied theology at the Lutheran Seminary in Sao Leopoldo, Brazil. He has taught at the Ma-

tanzas Protestant seminary in Cuba, and served as a pastor in Brazil, Costa Rica and Cuba. He is married and has one adult daughter.

Giese's predecessor, Rev. Israel Batista, a Methodist from Cuba, took up office in 1999. He had previously worked for the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland.

Headquartered in Quito, Ecuador, CLAI groups about 140 mainly Protestant churches in Latin America and the Caribbean.

(From the Latin America and Caribbean Communication Agency – ALC)



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