

# Strengthening Participation and Dialogue Lutheran Engagement in Public Space

Proposal for a study group that develops a Lutheran statement  
*to be presented at the LWF Council Meeting in June 2016*

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## Objective

Develop a statement that gives a strong theological rationale for Lutheran engagement in plural societies and provides guiding principles for such engagement locally and globally.

## Background

LWF member churches live in religiously plural societies with different configurations. There are a variety of ways in which churches relate to the state, to other religious communities and to other actors in society. These configurations are shaped by constitutional and legal frameworks on the one hand, public discourse and living encounter on the other. In the midst of all varieties, there are some global trends for how the relationship between the spiritual and the worldly realms is conceived of. The discussions seem to get more polarized, at the international and at the local levels. Whereas some praise the important role of religions in society and the leadership they provide, others warn against a dangerous “resurgence of religion”. Some strongly call for a clear-cut disentanglement of religion and politics, others see it as naturally intertwined. Within these debates there are strongly divergent understandings of politics and of religion. In the midst of this contested terrain it is important for churches to give account of the reasons for why they engage in what kind of way with others in the public space. Providing theological reflection on their engagement is a core dimension of the churches’ public witness. It gives clarity and credibility to the churches’ advocacy work, diaconal engagement and public relations.

## Lutheran insights

Lutheran theology clearly distinguishes, but does not advocate for an antagonistic divide, between the worldly and the spiritual realm. It provides a strong rationale for commitment for the common good and a public sphere that gives space for different communities to interact peacefully. Traditionally, Lutheran theology has focused on the state as actor and guarantor for justice and peace. It also emphasizes the government’s responsibility for providing education so that people are enabled to become mature citizens.

In democratic societies today, the focus on the citizens as actors has become even stronger and the need for empowerment more urgent. “Citizenship” has become a key concept in plural societies. It enables to establish a public space where people of different religious, ethnic, gender and other identities can interact as different yet equal persons. The concept of citizenship helps to critique discourses of majority vs. minority groups, it enables to name injustice and oppression and to develop visions of a just society jointly. In order to constructively engage with plurality, a dialogical attitude and dialogical methodologies have become an important dimension of how we engage and walk ways together with others.

## LWF's unique position to provide a grounded approach

There are important resources and experiences in LWF member churches, in LWF/DWS programs, in the LWF/DTPW interreligious program and in theological seminaries where cooperation with people of other faiths as well as theological reflection on the relationship between faith and public space takes place. As a faith-based organization that works with people of different faiths, the LWF is in a unique position to provide a *grounded* approach. This approach is grounded in the deep Lutheran commitment to the neighbor and therefore takes as its main reference point the real life experiences of people. This grounded approach is able to, on the one hand, offer an alternative to those who predict the "clash of civilizations" (Huntington) where conflict and rivalry has become the main narrative. On the other hand, it provides a more substantial perspective than those who promote a too easy harmony narrative. The LWF addresses questions of power and hegemony and aims at mutual respect and recognition and concrete collaboration as neighbors.

## Proposal for thematic aspects of the social statement

- **Description and analysis** of challenges and opportunities with regard to
  - faith and the public sphere
  - role of religious communities in society and their relation to the state
  - the relationship between different religious communities
  - responding to injustice and conflicts, locally and in a global horizon
- **Theological insights:** Biblical perspectives and Lutheran insights during Reformation time
- **Learning processes** of Lutherans in complex realities (different contexts, historical and contemporary) re: the role of religious communities in society
- **Lutheran vision of plural societies today and tomorrow:** What are the principles and point of orientation that shape our vision for our societies?
- **Areas of Lutheran engagement today, locally and globally:** Concrete examples from Lutheran churches and LWF programs

## Process

A study group of the best possible resources persons on this topic from within the Lutheran Communion, *one from each of the seven LWF regions*, is formed. The chairperson is Archbishop Dr Antje Jackelén from Sweden. The group members meet 29 to 31 January 2015, give presentations on the core issues, discuss them and develop the outline for the statement. The drafting of the statement is shared among some study group members. The draft of the statement needs be ready by the end of 2015. A second meeting is convened beginning of 2016 to discuss the final draft which will then be presented to the LWF Council in June 2016.