



# Human Beings – Not for Sale



THE  
LUTHERAN  
WORLD  
FEDERATION



# HUMAN BEINGS—NOT FOR SALE

**EDITED BY  
ANNE BURGHARDT**

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# INTRODUCTION

*Anne Burghardt*

This booklet is part of a small collection published by the Lutheran World Federation on the occasion of the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation in 2017. “Human Beings—Not For Sale” is one of the three sub-themes of the Anniversary’s main theme, “Liberated by God’s grace.” The popular essays in this booklet were written by authors from all regions of the Lutheran World Federation; the ecumenical voice is here represented by a Reformed theologian.

The renewed relationship between God and the human being in Christ, expressed by the doctrine of justification, inevitably provides a deeper insight into the creation of human beings in God’s image and the understanding that human beings will be renewed through God’s Grace. Human beings can therefore not be regarded as commodities whose value can be measured in terms of profit only. This booklet explores different aspects of the theme “Human Beings—Not For Sale,” ranging from an interpretation of Lutheran anthropology to human trafficking, migration and sustainable ways of living together. The list of topics addressed by the essays is far from exhaustive. Nonetheless we hope to offer some initial impulses for theologically informed discussions on the dignity of all human beings.



# THE HUMAN CONDITION—A LUTHERAN PERSPECTIVE

*Friederike Nüssel*

“Human beings—nor for sale.” Why and in what sense can Lutherans endorse such a statement? In this paper I will consider some major points of Christian anthropology from a Lutheran perspective. Before going into detail, we shall briefly reflect on some significant changes during the sixteenth-century Reformation. The Reformers benefitted in various ways from the development of Renaissance humanism and the new attention to the achievements of human beings in the areas of philosophy, philology, architecture, the fine arts, engineering, etc. During this era of progress, the church in the West was unable to respond to the ever more pressing need for reform. Instead, the major concern of the Roman Church was to defend its political influence and to preserve and emphasize the role of ecclesial hierarchy in late medieval society, especially through the practices of penance and indulgences.

## **LUTHER’S DISCOVERY: GOD’S GRACE—NOT FOR SALE**

In this context, the young Martin Luther (1483–1546) had promised to devote his whole life to God and to become a monk. He sincerely strove for a pure monastic life, was constantly investigating God’s will and trying to accumulate merits as satisfaction for his sins. While the practice of penance and indulgences offered ways to compensate for deficiencies, Luther, however, by constantly ransacking his conscience never felt that he had done enough on his part to love God so that he would deserve God’s justification. His struggles with himself eventually led him to struggle with God and to ask “[w]hat kind of God would it be who summons humans by their own powers to love him above all things but clearly

has not given them the capacity for it, and in the end elects the one and rejects the other?”<sup>1</sup> The more he asked this question the less he was able to love God with his whole heart. Luther ended up in a vicious circle and felt like a slave.

With the pastoral support of the superior in the order Augustinian Order, Johann of Staupitz, and through intense Bible study over the years, Luther learned to understand God’s justice and righteousness in a new way. He saw that according to the Bible, God was not righteous by punishing trespasses and rewarding human obedience but, rather, by granting righteousness in and through the life, death and resurrection of God’s Son Jesus Christ. In a biographical review in the preface to the edition of his Latin works (1545), Luther described the deep, personal effect of his theological discovery. While this late document is not a reliable resource for reconstructing Luther’s development as a reformer and his original reformed insight, it still gives an impression of how Luther’s discovery of God’s real righteousness changed his life and attitude to God. Luther felt born anew. Now he could trust in God and love God for God’s mercy and unconditional love. Hence, he no longer felt a slave to God’s Law.

Moreover, he realized that the ecclesial practices of penance and indulgences did not do justice to God, because they neglected God’s pure grace and unconditioned mercy realized in Jesus Christ and promised in the gospel. As a result, Luther criticized the ecclesial practice to picture God as a dealer who sells God’s grace to those who prepare themselves by works. But, according to the Bible, God’s grace is not for sale. God’s justification is not to be earned by works. Rather, God grants justification by faith alone to those who trust in God’s grace revealed in Jesus Christ.

The doctrine of justification by faith alone became the core idea in Luther’s theology and the reformation movement in Wittenberg. In the “Smalcald Articles” of 1537 Luther says:

Nothing in this article can be conceded or given up, even if heaven and earth or whatever is transitory passed away. As St. Peter says in Acts 4[:12]: “There is no other name [...] given among mortals by which we must be saved.” “And by his bruises we are healed” (Isa. 53[5]).

On this article stands all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world. Therefore we must be quite certain and have no doubt about it. Otherwise everything is lost, and the pope and the devil and whatever opposes us will gain victory and be proved right.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 33.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Martin Luther, “The Smalcald Articles, 1537,” in Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (eds), *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 301.

Therefore, the article of justification was taken as the basic and chief article of faith by which the church stands or falls according to Lutheran teaching. It also shapes the Lutheran understanding of God’s creation and the human condition.

## **TOWARDS A REALISTIC UNDERSTANDING OF THE HUMAN CONDITION**

Along with his discovery of God’s true righteousness, Luther came fully to recognize the radical character of sin. Had human beings been able to turn away from sin and lead their lives in accordance with God’s will, then it would not have been necessary for God to send God’s Son for the salvation of humankind. At the same time, it is only God who could overcome the power of sin. God’s almighty grace culminates in the fact that God creates the conditions for the regeneration of human beings and their reconciliation with God. Hence, God is not passive in receiving satisfaction through the meritorious death of Jesus Christ. Rather, through the incarnation, God is involved in the whole work of salvation. In Luther’s view, Jesus Christ does not suffer pain and death only by his human nature, but God suffers with God’s Son and through his resurrection overcomes the power of sin and death. In “On the Councils and the Church, 1539” he explains the intimate relation between Christology and soteriology:

[...] Christ is God and man in one person because whatever is said of him as man must also be said of him as God, namely, Christ has died, and Christ is God; therefore, God died – not the separated God, but God united with humanity. [...] We should always rejoice in true faith, [...], and thank God the Father for such expressible mercy that he let his dear Son become like us, a man and our brother! [...] We Christians should know that if God is not in the scale to give it weight, we, on our side, sink to the ground. I mean it this way: if it cannot be said that God died for us, but only a man, we are lost; but if God’s death and a dead God lie in the balance, his side goes down and ours goes up like a light and empty scale. Yet he can also readily go up again, or leap out of the scale! But he could not sit on the scale unless he has become a man like us, so that it could be called God’s dying, God’s martyrdom, God’s blood, and God’s death. For God in his own nature cannot die; but now that God and man are united in one person, it is called God’s death when the man dies who is one substance or one person with God.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See the passage in Martin Luther, “On the Councils and the Church, 1539,” in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 41 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 103f.

In light of this revelation of God's grace human beings may learn to perceive their true situation with new eyes. While God's Law in the Ten Commandments allows recognizing individual sins, the life and death of Jesus Christ, God incarnate, allow us to recognize the radical character of human sin and forsakenness, which for Luther culminates in the attempt to achieve righteousness before God by works, because in this very attempt human beings ignore God's unconditional grace. By not fully trusting in God's benevolence and grace, human beings fail to fulfill God's first and basic commandment that, according to Luther's interpretation in the "Small Catechism," commands "to fear, love, and trust God above all things."<sup>4</sup> In the "Heidelberg Disputation, 1518" Luther states,

The person who believes that he can obtain grace by doing what is in him adds sin to sin so that he becomes doubly guilty.<sup>5</sup>

While Luther's understanding of sin is based on his understanding of God's righteousness and salvation, it is also nourished by experience and psychological insight. From experience Luther could tell that the human being "constantly transgresses the First Commandment by not putting all his trust in God."<sup>6</sup> The reason for this lies in the very nature of sin, which, in line with Augustine, he found in a perversion of the will according to which human beings are self-centered. Without faith in God, human beings constantly seek their own advantage and honor, rather than God's and their neighbor's. They not only use the physical but also the spiritual gifts to their own advantage since they think that they can earn righteousness before God through their works. Luther does not regard it as wrong if human beings want to do good works and fulfill the Law. But as long as human works are done for the sake of self-justification, they cannot praise God as God's love and unconditional grace are ignored. Moreover, in the attempt to justify themselves, human beings misconceive the limitations of their intellectual and moral capacities and ignore their fundamental dependence on the power of God's Spirit.

Luther's doctrine of sin may appear to convey an extremely pessimistic idea of the human condition. In fact, almost no other Christian denomination has such a radical understanding of sin. While, for most Christian traditions, sin consists in a lack of faith and a corresponding self-centeredness according to which human beings tend to strive for their own recognition and tribute, rather than to concentrate on the needs of their neighbors in an altruistic manner, Lutheran theology sees the fatal character of sin in the fact that it entangles human beings

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, "The Small Catechism, 1529," in op. cit. (note 2), 351.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther, "Heidelberg Disputation, 1518," in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 50.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1996), 145f.

in a constant self-deception regarding their autonomy that results in manifold attempts of self-justification, not only toward God, but also in human relationships.

Obviously, in the context of modern secularization the theological notion of sin has become unpopular. As a result, the word “sin” in everyday language is used only in a trivial sense. While Lutherans might be tempted to say that in this development the deceptive character of sin has merely reached another level, it is more fruitful to reflect on the consequences that arise from a loss of the radical notion of sin in a theological sense. In Lutheran theology the insight into the radical character of sin corresponds to his insight into the overwhelming power of God’s grace. Without exception all human beings depend on God’s grace and providence in order to leave self-centeredness behind and turn to real trust in God and orientation toward the other. Hence, “so that no one might boast in the presence of God” (1 Cor 1:29). The doctrine of sin is unpopular precisely because it points to the negative side of the equality of human beings. Yet, to acknowledge sin in light of God’s grace helps to be realistic about one’s own capabilities and offers a compelling reason to be forgiving and generous with others.

## **HUMAN BEINGS—MADE TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY**

Luther’s understanding of the *conditio humana* is realistic as it deconstructs illusions about the human ability perfectly to love God and to lead a perfect life before God. As a consequence, Lutheran theology has often been accused of undermining the role of ethics and human behavior and works. It even appeared defeatist. But Luther’s perception of human incapacity in relation to God is only one side of his thought on the human condition. In light of his discovery of God’s righteousness and pure grace he comes to appreciate God’s good creation and providence. In the “Small Catechism” he teaches the believer to take from the first article of the Apostle’s Creed.

I believe that God has created me together with all that exists. God has given me and still preserves my body and soul: eyes, ears, and all limbs and senses; reason and all mental faculties. In addition, God daily and abundantly provides shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse and children, fields, livestock, and all property—along with all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life. God protects me against all danger and shields and preserves me from all evil. And all this is done out of pure, fatherly and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all! For all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther, “The Small Catechism, 1529,” in *op. cit.* (note 2), 354–55.

Equipped and protected in this way, human beings are called to cooperate with God, who has made God's creatures, and in particular human beings, to serve God and constantly to fight evil.<sup>8</sup> It is the particular responsibility of human beings to work for the good in this world and to promote justice and peace. This is possible because human beings are created in the image of God (cf. Gen 1:26f.). While late medieval scholastic teaching explained the image of God in psychological categories, with a focus on rational capacities, Luther saw the essence of the *imago Dei* in the special relationship with God through which human beings are created to participate in God's justice, holiness and truth. This is what distinguishes human beings from all other creatures and endows them with a special human dignity that essentially includes the responsibility for one another as well as for other creatures.

But what is the effect of sin on the *imago Dei*? With regard to this question we can learn how in early Lutheran theology, philosophical terminology on the one hand, and philological exegesis on the other, came into conflict. According to patristic and medieval readings of Genesis 1:26, the image of God was the substance of human beings. Thus, sin could only destroy the similarity or Godlikeness, but not the divine image itself. Luther, however, discovered that, in philological terms, the two terms "image" and "likeness" in Genesis 1:26 have the same meaning. He concluded that original sin must result in a loss of the *imago Dei*. Accordingly, Luther and Lutheran theology saw the scope of salvation in the restoration of the *imago Dei*. Yet, in Aristotelian terminology, the idea of a loss and restoration of the *imago Dei* is aporetic because a loss of the *imago Dei* would come down to a loss of human substance. Luther did not care too much about a philosophically coherent terminology. While he would affirm that human beings do not cease to be God's creatures, even if they turn away from God in sin, he would also insist that sin is a radical perversion of the will that by nature is irreversible without God's help. His theological successors attempted to reconcile theology and philosophical terminology by a number of distinctions, before philosophical enlightenment led to a general critique of Aristotelian philosophy. As a result, modern Lutheran theology interprets the Godlikeness of human beings no longer in ontological categories.

Rather, what Godlikeness means can only be understood by looking at Jesus Christ, whom the Apostle Paul describes as the second Adam. Jesus Christ was truly Godlike in fully devoting his life to the proclamation of God's gospel of the future kingdom. He would never act in his own interest, but in the interest of his fellow human beings, especially in the interest of those who were outsiders in the society of the time. He took responsibil-

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Luther's lecture on the book of Genesis, *WA* 42, 56, 30f.

ity for them, he suffered and died for them on the cross and in this way revealed what love can do. So, in him we can perceive the true character of the *imago Dei*. It is not an ontological quality that human beings own. Rather, it lies in the ability to develop a trusting relationship with God by which human beings will do justice to God and will be free to concentrate on the needs of their neighbors. Thus, faith in Jesus Christ helps to live out the human condition to which human beings are created.

Luther's perception of the human condition is realistic in the sense that he fully acknowledges the power of sin and the dependence on God's life-giving grace. It is neither pessimistic nor does it in any way nourish a defeatist attitude. Human beings are God's creatures and benefit from God's providence in all circumstances. They are created in the image of God and will be renewed through God's grace. God's grace is not for sale and, correspondingly, human beings are not for sale. They do not have a value that human beings could measure or compare—whether or not they believe in God. While sin by nature corrupts the adequate relationship with God and the right attitude toward God, it does in Luther's view not destroy the intellectual and emotional outfit of human beings and their capacity to promote civil encounter and social welfare. Human beings are capable of and responsible for contributing to communal life and peaceful encounter in a civil society in their own way with their individual calling and charisma. This is possible without faith in Jesus Christ as it is possible to acknowledge human dignity and human rights without being a religious person. Faith is not a necessary condition to realize that human beings are not for sale. Yet, with the insight into the character of God's grace we get the chance to be more realistic about the human condition. As we can be more honest about our own intentions, we may be more forgiving with others, and as we look at the selfless life and death of Jesus Christ, we may realize that true responsibility culminates in true love of and attention to the needs of others.

## QUESTIONS

*Nowadays, the notion of sin is unpopular. Even in Christian talk there is a tendency to play down the radical character of sin as a phenomenon that used to be crucial in the Lutheran tradition. How do you perceive this today? What is the responsibility in our talk about sin?*

*Lutheran theology is challenging as it combines a strong sense of sin with a strong sense of responsibility. In light of God's grace we may be more realistic and, at the same time, the gospel opens our sense for taking responsibility for the sake of the other. How can you relate to this in your context?*

*Human dignity is taken as a core idea in modern political, philosophical and theological discourse. It is not evident that Christianity has been a good advocate of human dignity and human rights throughout the centuries. What could or should be a particular Christian or Lutheran contribution to promote the idea of human dignity in today's world?*

# HUMAN TRAFFICKING

*Ebise Dibisa Ayana*

Article 3 of the *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime*, adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 55/25 of 15 November 2000 of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, defines human trafficking as follows:

the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.<sup>1</sup>

This protocol entered into force on 29 September 2003<sup>2</sup> and many countries are using it to combat the trade in human beings. The purposes of this protocol are to prevent and combat trafficking in persons, paying particular attention to women and children; to protect and assist the victims of such trafficking, with full respect for their human rights; and to promote cooperation among state parties in order to meet those objectives.<sup>3</sup> The protocol

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<sup>1</sup> At [www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/ProtocolTraffickingInPersons.aspx](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/ProtocolTraffickingInPersons.aspx)

<sup>2</sup> At [www.unodc.org/unodc/treaties/CTOC/](http://www.unodc.org/unodc/treaties/CTOC/)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

helps to enforce laws to combat human trafficking and to set principles for domestic law to address organized crime. It outlines all possible methods involved in the trafficking of human beings.

My intention here is to analyze the problem of the victims of trafficking and to deconstruct it on the basis of theological exploration. The aim of this study is to provide further reflections on the extent and nature of the trafficking of Ethiopian women and to enable churches and communities to gain insight into this reality in Ethiopia. The trafficking of women in Ethiopia is a growing reality, and one of the main questions for the churches and theologians is what theological response can be given to this reality and what actions could be taken in order to address the problem and help the victims.

## **THE SCOPE OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

Throughout the world, human trafficking, especially the trafficking in women and children, is wide spread. It is a crime against humankind, involving the acts of recruiting, transporting, transferring, harboring or obtaining people for exploitation by use of force, deception or other means. Thousands of men, women and children fall into the hands of traffickers, in their own countries and abroad. Many countries in the world are affected by trafficking, whether as the country of origin, transit or destination of the victims.

The global report on trafficking (UNODC) shows that, globally, human trafficking is on the increase. According to the 2009 report covering the years 2003–2007, 155 countries are affected by human trafficking as source, transit and/or destination countries.<sup>4</sup> The majority of the victims, of whom ninety-eight percent are women and girls, are aged between eighteen and twenty-four.<sup>5</sup> According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM),

Although the global scale of human trafficking is difficult to quantify, as many as 800,000 people may be trafficked across international borders annually, with many more trafficked within the borders of their own countries. Finland is both a transit and a destination country for tens or even hundreds of victims of trafficking every year.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/Global\\_Report\\_on\\_TIP.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/Global_Report_on_TIP.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> At [www.iom.fi/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=93&Itemid=109](http://www.iom.fi/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=93&Itemid=109)

This shows that it is not only a problem of poor and underdeveloped countries. For instance, my country, Ethiopia, is a country of origin for men, women and children who are trafficked primarily for the purpose of forced labor and, to a lesser extent, for sexual exploitation.

Ethiopia is a source country for men, women, and children trafficked primarily for the purposes of forced labor and, to a lesser extent, for commercial sexual exploitation. Rural Ethiopian children are trafficked for domestic servitude and, less frequently, for commercial sexual exploitation and forced labor in agriculture, traditional weaving, gold mining, street vending, and begging. Young women from all parts of Ethiopia are trafficked for domestic servitude primarily to Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE [...].<sup>7</sup>

Human trafficking has reached dimensions that are comparable with other illegal businesses such as drug trafficking. People are exploited in several ways, including sexual exploitation, forced labor, low wages and heavy workload. Worldwide, women and children are forced into abusive labor, prostitution and exploitation.

Articles 3, 4 and 5 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights state:

Article 3

Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

Article 4

No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

Article 5

No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman treatment or degrading treatment or punishment.<sup>8</sup>

While several countries have passed laws addressing the major forms of trafficking such as sexual exploitation and forced labor, many countries in Africa for instance do not have legislation on human trafficking, or they have laws that only criminalize some aspects of human trafficking such as child trafficking.<sup>9</sup> In some countries, the issue of trafficking is a very recent phenomenon.

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<sup>7</sup> [www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/2009/123136.htm](http://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/2009/123136.htm)

<sup>8</sup> At [www.ohchr.org/en/udhr/documents/udhr\\_translations/eng.pdf](http://www.ohchr.org/en/udhr/documents/udhr_translations/eng.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Op. cit. (note 4).

## THE EFFECTS OF TRAFFICKING ON HUMAN BEINGS

Human trafficking affects the well-being of human beings and has serious emotional, psychological, physical and social consequences.

Common abuses experienced by trafficked persons include rape, torture, debt bondage, unlawful confinement, and threats against their family or other persons close to them as well as other forms of physical, sexual and psychological violence.<sup>10</sup>

These result in problems affecting the whole person and their self-perception. Trafficking does not lead to a life in freedom but to one of turmoil and, ultimately, death.

For the victims of trafficking, the dangerous conditions during the actual journey may lead to illness and injury. At the destination, women often suffer from health problems such as head and heart, liver and kidney problems.<sup>11</sup> Rates of injuries to Ethiopian women are the highest in the categories of broken bones, head trauma and bodily injuries that may finally lead to mortality.<sup>12</sup>

The majority of injuries and illnesses reported by women were the result of physical and sexual abuse [...] women were beaten, raped, and deprived of sleep, food, and other basic necessities, leading to fatigue, weight loss, and vulnerability to infection.<sup>13</sup>

In the context of trafficking, risks to reproductive and sexual health generally result from sexual abuse and violence. Trafficked women who are used as commodities for sex frequently suffer from different sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV. Women who become pregnant as a result of rape or forced sex are susceptible to undergo unsafe abortions.

Due to the distortion of their dignity, the trafficked migrant women often develop self-hate, different phobias, abnormal feelings of shame, self-imposed isolation to the point of not leaving the house and sometimes losing consciousness.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> At [www.iom.int/jahia/webdav/site/myjahiasite/shared/shared/mainsite/projects/documents/ct\\_brochure\\_en.pdf](http://www.iom.int/jahia/webdav/site/myjahiasite/shared/shared/mainsite/projects/documents/ct_brochure_en.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> *The Health Risks and Consequences of Trafficking in Women and Adolescents. Findings from a European Study, Including: Human Rights Analysis of Health and Trafficking and Principles for Promoting the Health Rights of Trafficked Women*, at [www.lshtm.ac.uk/hpu/docs/trafficking final.PDF](http://www.lshtm.ac.uk/hpu/docs/trafficking_final.PDF)

Women who are victims of trafficking suffer social alienation in the host and home countries. The absence of emotional and social support has an enormous effect on the women's ability to withstand and cope with the stress of their situation. They can easily develop a feeling of worthlessness in their society. For many victims, the lack of meaningful interpersonal contact leaves them feeling alone, and serves to reinforce their belief that relief or escape is ineffective.

## **THE TRAFFICKERS' MODUS OPERANDI**

The traffickers use different techniques. The recruiters promise the young women good jobs with high salaries in other provinces and countries. Subsequently, trapped by the recruiters' or agents' false promises, they are usually drawn into prostitution.<sup>15</sup> In terms of terminology, women who are deceived and coerced into bonded labor are referred to as "trafficked" while those who migrate willingly with an agent to work in exploitative conditions are usually considered "smuggled."<sup>16</sup> Smuggled women illegally enter the country of destination. The "smuggling of migrants is a crime involving the procurement for financial or other material benefit of illegal entry of a person into a State of which that person is not a national or resident."<sup>17</sup> Such women do not have protection. If they are caught by the police they will be beaten, fined and/or jailed. There are many such cases of Ethiopian domestic workers in Lebanon for instance. Deceit is one of the methods used by traffickers to deliver many women into the hands of the hunters.

## **THE CAUSES OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

The root cause of the trafficking of humans can be socioeconomic realities, gender inequality and instability. The women often see the offer made by the recruiters as an opportunity to be financially independent from their parents and male partners, and/or to be able to help their families financially. Most of the young girls vulnerable to trafficking are orphans and those who have to take care of their younger siblings. Others have sick parents who are unable to feed their families or single headed households and, in

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. [www.oit.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_emp/documents/publication/wcms\\_117931.pdf](http://www.oit.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_117931.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> At <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/smuggling-of-migrants.html>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

most cases, there is a severe shortage of resources. Frequently the families themselves force their young girls to work as domestic workers in order to improve the family's living conditions. The openness of some families to the trafficking of their female members is symptomatic of the fear they experience in light of the difficulties they have to survive. Furthermore, it also plays a role if the family has a "normalized" view of slavery, which in some countries remains deep rooted.

At the ecclesial and spiritual levels, the classical moral teachings of Christian theology have a profound effect on people, especially in the global South. Selflessness is an ideal and the "theology of suffering" plays an important role in the religious conviction of many Christians who fall into the hands of traffickers.

The "theology of suffering" is related to the suffering of Jesus. Jesus' sacrificial death redeemed people from the bondage of sin, death and Satan. This theology is the foundation of the church. Jesus suffered for the sake of the people. His suffering became a model for the suffering of people.

In many contexts of the world, it can be observed that women from a Christian background submit to the experience of suffering because they believe suffering to be related to redemption. In this case, they accept suffering as a good thing in order to redeem someone<sup>18</sup> and live according to the concept of "living for another." This concept makes women feel responsible for others, especially parents and families, and even their community. Although many family members share this feeling of responsibility, it has a particularly profound effect on women. It implies submerging one's own self to the other's identity, needs and interest and results in the women losing their identity. As a result, "a woman's self-actualizing potential is often anesthetized. She is taught to wait for someone to find her [...]"<sup>19</sup>

Among the moral virtues traditionally articulated by the Christian tradition, tolerance and obedience for instance can be interpreted in a way that helps to oppress women and lead them to subordinate to human trafficking. Tolerance is defined as the willingness to accept torture.<sup>20</sup> In the end, it leads the women to tolerate their problems and to lose self-esteem. They submit to trafficking as domestic workers although they know that they will experience oppression. The word obedience, meaning willingness to do what one is told to do, implies submission which can also easily

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<sup>18</sup> Gemma T. Cruz, *Into the Deep, A Theological Exploration of the Struggle of the Filipina Domestic Workers in Hong Kong* (Manila: UST Publishing House, 2006), 70.

<sup>19</sup> Joanne Wolski Conn (ed.), *Women's Spirituality. Resources for Christian Development* (Mahawi: Paulist, 1986, 1992), 11.

<sup>20</sup> Haddis Tiruneh, *The Works of St. Yarde In the Light of the Holy Bible* (Ethiopia: Addis Ababa, 1999), 8.

be misused. If one is obedient to someone this means that one is submissive to that person. The patriarchal dominance in the church implies that women are subject to the authority of men in all aspects. If the church's moral teachings are unbalanced, then it is easier for men to dominate women. Their identity becomes invisible and they lack self-direction, self-affirmation and self-reliance.

In many regions of the world, the church's misuse of moral teachings contributes to the discrimination against women, social segregation, racial and ethnic discrimination, cultural and religious differences, work exploitation and economic violence, sexual exploitation and abuses.

Many women believe that God is with them and gives them strength and patience in their suffering. In actual fact, this strength and patience would be necessary to resist oppression rather than submitting to exploitation. The Christian God is a liberating God.

## **THEOLOGY OF RESISTANCE AS A WAY OUT**

Enlarge the site of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes (Isa 54:2).

The theology of resistance is the theology that helps human beings to be conscious of themselves and to fight against trafficking: the selling and buying of humans as objects for the benefit of the traffickers and the employers. Human beings need to become more self-confident—no more holding back and waiting for other persons to speak up for them. It is time to “strengthen their stakes” to resist trafficking. They need to be fully aware of their human dignity and what they are subjected to—both in the positive and the negative sense—and to deal with it rather than simply submitting to it. The theology of resistance enables them to seek their full humanity and liberation instead of limiting their scope to a particular reality which they are tied to.

The journey of resistance is a journey from:

- Lack of self-esteem to self-definition: being aware of one's objectification and reacting against it by developing self-worthiness.
- Submission to anger: anger is better understood as a feeling signalling that all is not well in our relation to ourselves or groups or to the world around us. Anger needs to be understood as recognizing that our self needs love and compassion in spite of difficulties. In this context, it is to be understood as the will to change the oppressive circumstances under which one is forced to live.

- Shame/guilt to self-acceptance: women are created with dignity. Developing self-pride is rescuing women's self from guilt and shame feelings and resisting the damage, trauma and self-rejection that come with the experience of being mistreated as a human being.

The churches finding a new way of communicating moral teachings that leads human beings to self-awareness is a new way of resisting the submission to human trafficking. Women relate the suffering of Jesus to their experience of suffering and accept it due to the strong emphasis laid on suffering in the church's moral teachings. Therefore, suffering becomes normal and naturalized in human life. Christ's sacrificial death is interpreted as a model for sacrificing human beings, especially women. God's liberating power is not announced and suffering becomes life's final destiny. In the name of being a good Christian woman, silent and obedient, this teaching is not encouraging women openly to speak about their suffering and to denounce the violence they are victims of.

It is therefore necessary to:

- Reexamine the theology of suffering where the victorious image of the divine should be addressed in the churches' teaching and counselling. God is a liberating God. Suffering is a struggle from transformation to liberation. Suffering is not final for human beings.
- Revisit the biblical teachings of crucifixion. This will empower women to see that death is not the final answer in the gospel. An interpretation of the theology of the cross can motivate us to see Jesus as a model to overcome suffering.
- Review the moral teachings of churches that force humans to submit to trafficking.

The moral teaching of churches impact women's lives. In light of the fact that some societies are inclined to be positive toward trafficking, there is an urgent need for a change in attitude. Sociological studies on human trafficking have shown that socioeconomic factors lead some societies and the victims' families to turn a blind eye to the trafficking of their daughters, sisters, brothers and wives.

From their unequal social locations, gendered stereotypes that present men as powerful and in control, and women as passive and primarily relegated to the private sphere, feed the misconception in many societies that women are socialized to do housework. Such stereotypes contribute to the trafficking of women as they are socialized to be obedient and quietly to obey their husbands/men.

It is the church's responsibility to ensure that our young girls and boys, men and women, are educated; education can be a powerful tool to overcome the gender stereotypes that are keeping women in a subordinate position. Awareness building in the congregation includes identifying available resources, support services and organizations that can provide support for the victims, both with regard to their physical safety (shelter, food, medication and hygiene) and psychological well-being; to advocate for the equitable treatment of men and women. This will contribute to understanding the dignity of every human being and that God did not create human beings for sale.

## **CONCLUSION**

It should be self-evident that the church as a community of believers should be disturbed by human trafficking and the appalling ways in which this affects the rights of individuals. The violation of a human being constitutes a violation of God's temple. When a person is oppressed, the human family is diminished. When contemplating human trafficking and its effects, we quickly realize that change is crucial. This includes changing certain attitudes, still prevalent in many societies and churches, such as associating men with human characteristics defined as superior and dominant, and women with those defined as inferior and passive. Patriarchal domination contradicts the liberating message of God's grace that has come to us in Jesus Christ.

Over the centuries, the churches have occasionally adopted moral teachings of non-Christian origin (like the teaching of Aristotle about the role of women). The churches' teachings that enforce the suffering and oppression of women can be challenged by teaching the equality of men and women as created in the image of God and by addressing God's liberating power. Creating an environment in which people find sustainable work and live from their income is also important. By truly embracing the principle of equality and avoiding misconceptions, a glimpse of light can be seen at the end of the tunnel.

## QUESTIONS

*What do you know about “human trafficking” today in your own context?*

*How might our understanding of “being created in the image of God” impact the way in which we live today?*

*What are the challenges that the church faces in putting this understanding of being created in the image of God into action and how do we interpret this in the light of human trafficking?*

# CHURCH, POLITICS AND THE USE OF POWER: SOME EXAMPLES FROM HUNGARY

*Tamás Fabiny*

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

After 1945 Hungary became part of the Soviet sphere of interest. Over the next couple of years, people enjoyed relative freedom under Hungary's coalition government. The Communists seized power by widespread electoral fraud in 1947. Using so-called salami tactics, also known as salami-slice strategy, they divided and destroyed the other political parties and, in some cases, absorbed the left wing of these. With the substantial help of the Soviets, they nationalized the factories and forced the agricultural workers into kolkhozy, collective farms. During the same period, church schools were secularized. Historically, the churches had been responsible for managing many public schools in Hungary. Bar a few exceptions, church schools were closed and the Evangelical-Lutheran Church could retain none of its schools. With some delay, the world-famous Lutheran school of Fasor was also taken away. Religious orders and deaconess associations were dissolved and many church people were imprisoned. During the one-party system, the media were censored and thus paralyzed. The compulsory ideology of so-called real socialism impacted the arts and Soviet atheistic propaganda infiltrated the intellectual circles of the time. A specific term was coined during this era, namely the so-called "bell-freak": innocent people were paralyzed by fear when the doorbell rang late in the evening, because it might be the police coming to take people away, without giving any reason. At that time, being a pastor also meant taking a risk. The best known bishop of my church, Lajos Ordass, was imprisoned and many of his colleagues were relocated or forced to give up their ministry and to make a living as blue-collar workers. At the time, there seemed to be no

prospects for pastors. But vocation conquered circumstance. Let me give you an example from my own family. My father had a very strong calling from God, and although he had an excellent position as a lawyer, he wanted to be a pastor because the Holy Spirit had touched him. He did not care that if he was lucky he would be called to serve as a pastor somewhere in a godforsaken village. He was ready to face suffering. As a theological student he and some other students had participated in an evangelization campaign and had distributed small booklets containing John's Gospel in the street. On the booklets it said "printed in the USA." Because of this, they were arrested by the police. He told us that they spent the night praying to the Lord just as Paul and Silas had done. In the morning they were rebuked and could go home. The interrogating officer said to them, "Give me a piece of that booklet, my wife likes to read these kinds of writings."

The 1956 revolution or uprising was an attempt to put an end to this totalitarian situation. Freedom ruled only for a few days until the Soviets occupied the country and quashed the revolution. A period of so-called "soft dictatorship" followed. People often referred to this as "goulash Communism" or "the happiest barrack in the Socialist camp" because, compared to the other Socialist countries, the standard of living in Hungary was relatively high. Today we realize that in fact these decades led to a greater deterioration in the life of the churches than an open dictatorship might have done. In an open dictatorship, the difference between good and bad is clearly defined and therefore Christian believers are ready to suffer. In a soft dictatorship, the boundaries are not so clear and many people, including church leaders, made unprincipled compromises in order to survive.

This situation impacted people serving in the church: no one had to risk their life anymore. While there were boundaries it was possible, and perhaps sometimes too easy, to find a *modus vivendi*. The relationship between church and state was like that of a patron and a client: one would receive smaller or bigger favors thanks to the cooperation between a loyal church leadership and the State Office for Church Matters (originally created for the persecution of the church): one could get a better job; one was granted a possibility to travel abroad; and pastors' children were admitted to university provided everybody agreed to the rules of the so-called real socialism. One can imagine what a distorting influence this had on some pastors' personalities. For many being a pastor meant adapting to the external framework, often having to make decisions against one's conscience and not to touch on certain taboos (1956, the Soviet presence, one-party system) in exchange for practicing one's vocation as an outcast in society, but within the confines of the church in the form of a "vestry-Christianity."

It is therefore hardly surprising that at the time of the regime change in 1989 the churches were unprepared. During those months, we often used the

term “the last forty years.” This metaphor, which drew a parallel between the era of oppression and being squeezed into boundaries and the forty years’ wandering of the Jewish people in the desert, seemed particularly appropriate at the time. It was an alluring image for us because we could talk about slavery and plagues and about the fact that God’s people had to cross the Red Sea. It was possible to mention the different kinds of idolatry and infidelity and finally we could point to a new generation. However, we could not see either a Moses or an Aaron ahead of us, or a Joshua belonging to the new generation—not to talk about Canaan.

If we want to find a biblical metaphor, then a series of events that occurred a couple of centuries later seem to be much more appropriate in order to depict the situation of the churches at the time: the end of the Babylonian captivity of the Jewish people. In the sixth century BC the political and social situation, believed by the superpowers to be extremely stable and unshakeable, changed so radically that the Jewish population, which had been taken to captivity some decades earlier at the time of Nebuchadnezzar, could return home. There is a visible parallel at least at two points. First, it was not the chosen people who fought heroically and thus gained their freedom back with their desperate prophets and members of the nation faithful until the end, but simply that the “constellation of world politics,” “the structure of great powers,” “the historical reality” had changed. Of course we cannot deny that the Lord of history is hidden; God can steer God’s people’s lives in very secular ways as well. With some confidence we can also suppose that the witness of some to a certain extent contributed to the fall of a great power at the time of the Babylonian captivity and to the system change that took place in the satellite nations after the Soviet occupation.

The other parallel we can draw between this historical situation and the Hungarian regime change is that the returning Jews did not find their country in an orderly state: it was not a situation conducive to peaceful work. Rather, they found ruins—ruins everywhere. Ezra and Nehemiah began to tackle the situation by removing the debris and rebuilding the Temple. The political changes in 1989–1990 found the churches in Hungary in the same situation: they were in ruins and a long and tiring process of reconstruction had to begin. It was impossible to continue from the point at which God’s people had been before being taken into captivity or before the cessation of religious freedom. In the words of a Hungarian writer, one more biblical metaphor became part of every-day language, “there is a big crowd on the way to Damascus.” This was a rather sardonic expression related to political conformity and not an indication of people joining the church in huge numbers. The difficulties of having to start afresh are well described in the four-line poem by the Hungarian poetess Ágnes Nemes

Nagy, which she wrote when, after a period of forced silence, her poems could once again be published.

In his left shoulder, as he rose again,  
each muscle felt a lifetime's every pain.  
His death was torn from him, as was his dressing,  
For resurrection is just as distressing.<sup>1</sup>

## PRESENT SITUATION

Twenty-five years have passed since then. The relationship between the elected governments and the churches has undergone a series of changes. There were and still are political parties that regard the role of the churches as being a merely spiritual one rather than one of participating in public life. This is what I call “vestry-Christianity”: that is, when religious communities are pushed to remain within the confines of the church. Conservative church circles do not object to this interpretation since they feel that the churches should only deal with spiritual questions in this “sinful world.”

There are, on the other hand, some political parties that regard the churches (or to be more exact, their preferred churches) as “natural partners.” It seems as if they want to compensate the churches for the loss of church property, prestige and intellectual influence.

I find both attitudes rather dangerous. In a radio interview during the time of the Socialist (practically post-Communist) government in Hungary I described my position as follows: “I can hardly wait to critique a Conservative government.” This was a twofold idea: on the one hand, I was dissatisfied with the Socialist government and wished for a change; on the other, the presence of the church in society must be characterized by a critical relation to political power. The church has to fulfill a prophetic role as we can see from Isaiah, Jeremiah or Jesus. The church should not follow the current political power without critique. Since the regime change and even more so since the period between 1990–1994 there is the suspicion that politics tries to influence the churches: they want to tell us how to practice our faith.

In 1997, in order to deal with earlier conflicts, the Hungarian government brokered an agreement first with the Roman Catholic Church, and afterwards also with other churches. The so-called normative support system, which later caused much tension, was actually aimed at domesticating the churches. Later governments made similar attempts. Relations

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<sup>1</sup> Translation into English by Peter Zollmann.

were sometimes friendly, sometimes less so. Over the last years there have been many issues, such as the new church law and the criminalization of the homeless, on which the church had to take a critical stance. I could not remain silent when the name of God was being inserted into the constitution and had to speak out against the increasing popularity of the extreme right. I have direct experience as a bishop in a district the majority of which lies in North-Eastern Hungary where a radical right-wing party has been especially strong in the last four years.

Nowadays we often talk about the risks of political Christianity, which refers to a situation in which those in power try to exploit the churches in a paternalistic way when they want to use the churches as a tool for reaching their own goals. This cannot be expected from any party—not even from the mayor who wants to treat the churches as his natural partner and demands political support from us. We can cooperate with several partners to create a common set of values but we are not anyone’s “natural partner.” The churches have suffered enough during the dictatorship when they were expected to support the state without exercising any form of critique. Luckily, even at that time, there were some people who resisted. We must not forget that the churches also experienced serious humiliation and unjust exclusion while the present opposition parties were in office.

Nevertheless, we cannot deny that the churches themselves have from time to time flirted with power. If the financial system in Hungary were healthy—which is not the case now—the churches would not be forced to lead constant financial negotiations with the government. I am here thinking of a transparent and reliable system of financing the churches that would remain untouched by changes in government, based on an understanding that churches are not only carrying out tasks in education and the social sphere but also that their spiritual work potentially has a healing effect on society.

In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hungary, we try to promote social sensitivity in many ways. In our educational journal, we strongly underline the topic of teaching tolerance and accepting each other in our schools, so that we are not only tolerant in our words but also our actions (i.e., the inclusion of Roma people, Jews, homosexuals, the disabled). We need to affirm that the church has zero tolerance of intolerance: the directors of our church schools have been asked to react immediately when they hear any anti-Semitic, anti-Roma or homophobic comments.

Today, intolerance not only characterizes party politics but there is also a tendency in Hungarian society not to be able to deal with those who are “different” from us, be that a blind person with a white stick or someone in a wheelchair. Perhaps the renewal of society could start with minor things such as noticing the other in need and not being ashamed

to help; organizing many small communities and providing meaningful programs; giving something altruistically, without compensation, etc. Or by discovering that real love does not seek value but creates it. I would like people to find such a community in our churches.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **THE HUMAN BEING IS NOT FOR SALE**

The LWF has chosen “Human Beings—Not for Sale” as one of the subthemes of the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation. I have included some examples from my personal life in this essay and have referred to historical eras in which people were deprived of freedom, both individually and collectively. The dignity of individuals or certain groups of society was violated; respectability was for sale and could be bought. In some cases the secret police, with the collaboration of ordinary people or those working at some level in the one-party system leadership, blackmailed or directly harmed both the young and the elderly. Nonetheless there were also good examples of how some retained their inner freedom, despite being constricted externally. They can be understood as having been guided by the Apostle Paul’s words: “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. We can cry, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Rom 8:15). We know a form of slavery that is actually freedom. Just as the Apostle Paul remained free in prison and proudly declared himself to be “the prisoner of Christ Jesus,” many confessors resisted putting their independence on sale. Luther, who was ready to question any authority of state or church, happily confessed that his conscience is “captive to the Word of God.” That’s why he could be really free!

### **PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF THE TEACHING OF THE TWO REALMS**

Besides the teaching on freedom, Luther’s understanding of the two kingdoms can also be applied to our situation. Under the totalitarian system, one had to be on guard and notice when the oppressing power put demands on people and when God’s governing intention was at play. For the church leadership (and in a way for each Christian), it was a temptation to merge the two. In the life of the Protestant churches in Hungary during the so-called real socialism it was widely accepted that God punishes the churches for sins committed under Nazism and for collaborating with the political power of the time. According to this understanding, churches must accept God’s anger, even in the most anti-godly decisions of the Communist state.

Consequently, the so-called “diaconical theology” of the time refrained from criticizing the political power of the time or even suggesting the slightest correction to them.

After the regime change, the churches suddenly found themselves on the beneficiary side, which now and then astonished even themselves. A number of pastors felt the urge to praise the current system from the pulpit and saw God’s direct will in the regained political freedom. “God is the Lord of history” became the justification for the political (sometimes even party-specific) presence of the church. The situation in which the churches managed to share in positions of power was not always consistent with the concept of the two realms. There were signs of mixing the kingdom of God with the actual world. The prayer “your kingdom come” was put on a par with the realization of a worldly state providing freedom. Going astray theologically was combined with the blasphemous effort of the political power to legitimize itself by using biblical metaphors. Politicians ending their speeches with *solī Deo gloria*, or others claiming that we, the Hungarians, are the chosen people, are simply misplaced in the public space.

### **THE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS**

As the third pillar of Luther’s theology, the theology of the cross can orient us. It is an interesting paradox that while the church was suffering under real oppression, it was not possible (or at least not in public) to speak about the importance of a “cruciform church.” Rather than talking about this topic many lived it out. When the time of freedom came, the church fell into the temptation of getting on the bright side, the side of glory and power, leaving a Christ-like and cruciform way of life. A well-fed, comforted church adapting to a consumer society falls short of the theology of the cross. In a world where “all-is-for-sale,” churches easily become part of consumer mentality. Therefore, in our times the church has to be alert not to give up shouldering the cross and not to make dangerous compromises.

I am convinced that the theme of 2017 Assembly—a genuinely biblical and reformatory theme—will help us to find our way back to the cross. What happened in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is not comparable to any human deed or business enterprise. It is the acting God who is present there. Therefore we confess to be “Liberated by God’s Grace.”

## QUESTIONS

*Do you know similar examples of ways from political oppression to freedom?*

*How relevant is Luther's teaching of the two realms in different political contexts?*

*How can the emphasis between the two elements of "critical solidarity" change?*

# LIFE WITH THE OTHER: MIGRATION, DISPLACEMENT AND GENDER JUSTICE

*Munib A. Younan*

As we move toward 2017 and our commemoration of 500 years of the Lutheran Reformation, I am grateful for the theme we are following: Not for Sale! The message of hope and love, proclaimed from the beginning of our evangelical tradition to the present, is truly Good News. As the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, “if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life” (Rom 5:10). As Paul assures us, this salvation is a free gift. It is not for sale!

The three “Not for Sale” themes—salvation, human beings and creation—are all related to one another. Because God created the heavens and the earth and was “in Christ [...] reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor 5:19), all of creation has been sanctified with God’s redeeming love. Because “by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Eph 2:8), the inherent value and dignity of every human being have been confirmed. The prophet Isaiah proclaimed God’s invitation for “everyone who thirsts, [to] come to the waters” for all who “have no money, [to] come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price” (Isa 55:1). The message of God’s salvation in Christ Jesus is a message of profound equality before God, where everything is given freely, where nothing is for sale. Creation is free. Redemption is freely given through the cross.

This message confronts a world where everything—from human beings to the gifts of the earth and even to the promise of salvation itself—is constantly offered in exchange for money and goods. From the exploitation of natural resources and official efforts to prevent further climate change

to human trafficking, the earth and all that is in it are offered up for sale. While these things are now happening on a larger scale, the same dynamics were present in the eras inhabited by Jesus and Martin Luther. In their historical periods, both the earth and human beings were degraded. Both confronted systems of false religious belief that claimed God demanded certain sacrifices in order to smooth the passage to salvation. Each of us is free because of Christ's sacrificial blood on the cross, which continues to set us free to this day. The message of the gospel was as clear then as it is now: neither salvation, nor human beings, nor creation itself can be purchased. All are expressions of God's good and gracious gift.

## **THE REFUGEE CRISIS**

In our world today, human competition over resources is driving ever greater conflict. As a result of these conflicts, human beings are displaced and driven to desperation. At the end of 2013, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that over 51.2 million persons worldwide had been forcibly displaced. Of these, 11.7 million were refugees living under the mandate of UNHCR, while another 5 million Palestinian refugees are registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) has a strong heritage of outreach to refugees. Our global communion was founded with the purpose of providing aid and relief to people in Europe suffering displacement and poverty after World War II. After that conflict, one out of every six Lutherans in the world was either a refugee or internally displaced person. Since then, we have built on that heritage and expanded our witness of serving the needy and vulnerable. We provide our services and resources for all who are in need, regardless of their religion, creed, or their national and tribal identity.

I am a Palestinian and a Christian. My home is in Jerusalem. My mother tongue is Arabic. We Palestinian Christians have lived in the Holy Land since Pentecost, the very beginning of Christianity. Today, we are not as many as we used to be, but we are nevertheless an integral part of Palestinian culture. My family belongs to the 1948 refugees. I still carry an UNRWA refugee card. My home is in Beit Safafa, near the Gilo settlement built on confiscated Palestinian land. With other Palestinians, I seek the just establishment of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, living alongside Israel in peace, justice and reconciliation. This goal includes the clarification of internationally recognized borders, a just resolution to the status of Israeli settlements and a just resolution to the chronic crisis of

Palestinian refugees. I seek these things not as part of a political program, but because I seek dignity for my people and for my neighbors.

I first learned about the LWF through a cup of hot chocolate given to us at the Martin Luther School in the Old City of Jerusalem. I remember wondering, “Why do these Lutherans love us and sustain us with food and drinks?” Today, I know that the global Lutheran church was embracing me as a Palestinian refugee. This love touched my heart; I felt challenged to pay back to the Lutherans all the good they had done for me, my family and other Palestinians. Later, I understood that the Lutheran theology of justification by faith alone drives us as Christians to serve freely even as we receive gratefully. We have received everything through God’s gracious love. It is a free gift that can never be repaid.

The LWF, which since 1948 has been active in Palestine, eventually empowered our church to emerge from a German mission heritage. I admire how the LWF empowered us but did not create ways to control us. It empowered the Evangelical Lutheran Church so that we could find our path to being an independent, sustainable church. We are indebted to the global Lutheran communion for its participation in the mission of God throughout the Middle East.

As a refugee myself from the 1948 war between the newly formed State of Israel and its neighbors, I know what it is like to live with profound uncertainty and fear. I know the reality of poverty. Most of all, I know what it means to live in a situation where circumstances and, sometimes, other people, are seeking to steal from a person their very dignity.

We do not honor this dignity when we see the refugee as anything but a charity case. Refugees do not exist so that we can help them and feel better about ourselves. Instead, the Christian disciple is invited to experience the face of God in the refugee, just as we see the face of God in other people who belong to our families and our congregations. I can attest to the fact that it is when we are at our most destitute, our most hopeless, that we are most conscious of our standing before God. With and through the refugee, we are invited into God’s presence. Through that presence, we are renewed and empowered in our motivation not only to give food, clothing and other resources, but to address the inequalities and structural injustices that force so many people into lives of vulnerability and fear.

Our Lutheran communion’s commitment not only to diakonia informs our commitment to alleviating suffering and addressing the root causes of oppression. Beyond this commitment to service, we also practice prophetic diakonia. The prophetic nature of our approach is found in our commitment to empower refugees, migrants, and all who struggle for justice, strengthening and amplifying their voices as they seek to change their own conditions and contexts. This is the prophetic diakonia our global communion is so well-suited to provide.

The LWF has a strong presence in the Middle East. Our communion's legacy of service in East Jerusalem is grounded in the witness of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL) and in the diakonia of Augusta Victoria Hospital, led for several years now by a Palestinian Christian CEO. This legacy has been extended into Jordan, where the LWF is helping establish and manage the Za'atari Refugee Camp for Syrians fleeing the civil war in their country. The continuing conflict has forced us to expand our reach even further, into Iraq.

In this global Lutheran communion, I have always found sisters and brothers in Christ working to help refugees and other persons in need keep their dignity as human beings and as children of God. Our human dignity is given by God alone. Each individual human being is blessed with the image of God in which all humanity was created. We are each of priceless worth in the eyes of God. No human being can ever be for sale!

## **CHRIST'S DISCIPLES, WELCOMING THE OTHER**

The LWF is at present serving about 2 million refugees in the world. That means that every group of seventy Lutherans is tending to the needs of one refugee. We are serving in Dadab, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Sudan, Peru, Nepal, Mauritania and many other places. Wherever we are present, we are focused on the practical needs of development and the prophetic call of empowerment.

Refugee empowerment goes far beyond providing the necessities of life. Supporting children's and adult education, providing meaningful activities and strengthening refugee capacity for protecting their rights all move us toward the goal of empowerment rather than providing charity alone.

In 2012, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, invited religious leaders to discuss the religious foundations for receiving refugees. How, he asked, can we best care for others who need our assistance? It was my idea that we could develop a code of conduct based on our many different scriptures and traditions. Guterres took the idea very seriously and, as a result, we developed a document entitled "Welcoming the Stranger: Affirmations for Faith Leaders"<sup>1</sup> which offers the religious foundations for caring for refugees. For me, Christians are called for two specific reasons: (1) because Christ himself, with the Holy Family, was a refugee in Egypt; and (2) Jesus' call in Nazareth, that "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to

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<sup>1</sup> At [www.lutheranworld.org/content/resource-welcoming-stranger](http://www.lutheranworld.org/content/resource-welcoming-stranger) and [www.unhcr.org/51b6de419.html](http://www.unhcr.org/51b6de419.html)

proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free” (Lk 4:18). This was Jesus’ understanding of his own call.

“Welcoming the Stranger” begins and ends with the simple affirmation, “I will welcome the stranger.” The document acknowledges that this commitment sometimes takes courage. But every faith tradition has the core action at the center of its commitments. “My faith teaches that compassion, mercy, love and hospitality are for everyone: the native born and the foreign born, the member of my community and the newcomer.”<sup>2</sup>

Our shared dignity and equality with people who are refugees and other people experiencing great need are shared also within our global communion. Together, we model what it means to live as equals before God, accepting one another with our strengths and our weaknesses intact. There is no doubt that there are many forms of inequality within our global communion. Some of our churches come from very rich countries while others, like my own ELCJHL, come from places others will not allow to be called a country!

These material inequalities do not change our relationship as equal members of the global communion any more than an individual’s poverty or wealth affect their status as a child of God. As the late bishop Josiah Kibira, one of my predecessors as president of the Lutheran World Federation, was fond of saying, there is no church so small, so poor, so young in age that it would not have something to give to other churches; and there is no church so old, so rich, and so old in tradition and history that it would not depend on these gifts from others.

It makes no sense from a Lutheran perspective to claim that one person is a stronger or better believer than any other. Each one of us is *simul iustus et peccator*, no more and no less, each in equal measure before God, through Christ Jesus. The danger in both of these forms of inequality is that our communion could become divided. One constructive response to these divisive challenges is to emphasize a discipleship of equals.

In the Christian tradition, the great signs of our profound equality before God can be found in our holy sacraments. Holy Baptism is the foundation of our shared witness. Our human tendency—in the church as well as in political relations—is to emphasize what divides us rather than what brings us together. Through water and the Word, we are engrafted into the church, the body of Christ. In Baptism, we are sent out into the world together for the sake of God’s holistic mission, in diaconal purpose. In 1984, our global communion agreed to the principle of pulpit and altar fellowship. The sacrament of the altar sends us out into the world as baptized members engrafted into the body of Christ to proclaim the Good

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

News of God's freely given love through word and deed. Our sacramental hope sends us out into the world as Christ's disciples engaged in prophetic diakonia for the sake of our neighbors.

We must all remember that our neighbors experiencing vulnerability and need are not always in far-away places. Refugees and impoverished migrants can be in our communities as well. In broad strokes, the problems of migration today are twofold. First, migrants are escaping political problems, often caused by the postcolonial experiences of their home countries; the problems they face have been caused by the legacy of Western colonization. The situations being fled by many migrants—including extremism, occupation, threats to life and dignity, and the lack of any economic optimism—often drive them toward the very countries that helped create their misery.

While they can often stay in those countries, they are faced with a second problem: the lack of any possibility of normal integration into the cultures of the host countries. In Europe especially, we see difficulties in fully accepting and receiving migrant populations. Many factors contribute to these difficulties. It is a challenge for our global communion not only to address the root causes of economic migration, but to assist those migrants and refugees struggling to live in the host countries. One real issue related to the lack of legal, economic and cultural integration is that migrants are moving all over the world, serving the wealthy. This leads to the exploitation of unprotected laborers. If human beings are not for sale, they must be respected in every context. The exploitation of labor is unacceptable in the eyes of our Lord.

Grounded in Baptism and strengthened through the Eucharist, we are sent out into diaconal service. For centuries, Christians of all confessions have engaged in vital, holistic ministry throughout the world. It is time for us to consider practical ways this work can be done together. The call to service and the call to mission cannot be separated. If we are doing one together, we are no doubt engaging in both together. Ephesians calls us to bear “with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:2-6).

The Lutheran emphasis—one we share with many other churches and communions—is that the grace we receive in our sacraments is a free gift given to us by a gracious and loving God. As another theme of our Reformation commemorations highlights, salvation is not for sale. The free offer of God's grace in the sacraments confirms our fundamental equality before God. None of us is of greater worth than any other. We are all priceless. No human being can ever be thought of as being for sale.

## WORKING TOWARD GENDER JUSTICE

I am very proud that the 2013 meeting of the LWF Council unanimously accepted the LWF Gender Justice Policy.<sup>3</sup> This is an important step forward for our global communion. The policy emphasizes the Lutheran theological foundation that each of us is equal in creation and in redemption. Everyone has the right to experience equality and justice, regardless of gender.

While this is an important document, we must still ask what this step means in practical terms. The question is how we can introduce and implement the Gender Justice Policy in all member churches. As it stands the policy provides an excellent foundation. It can be an example for many other churches and global communions. But it must not remain a general statement without contextualizing its commitments. In order to achieve this contextualization, it must be studied in every context.

In order to achieve the vision of gender justice in every context, we must commit to one another that we cannot hide behind culture, tradition or certain interpretations of the Bible in order to justify continued gender-based inequality. Those who use such arguments in order to continue discrimination are diminishing or even misrepresenting the biblical tradition and God's policy of equality. All culture is made by human beings; it was never made by men alone. Those who hide behind culture in conversations about gender justice and the ordination of women only make their chauvinism more apparent. In order to challenge those perspectives, it is my hope that every church within our global communion will study the Gender Justice Policy and take steps to tailor it to their contexts.

Our concern for the dignity and equal value of every human being finds positive expression in our communion's work to support gender justice. We do not only give good speeches; we are to practice these commitments in our governance and executive bodies. We hope that each one of our member churches will do this for the sake of the humanity we share. This work is important in the Middle East, where gender justice will be an important step toward healing the overall conditions of our societies. In the Middle East, the growth of extremism has had immediately negative effects on women throughout the Middle East.

The ELCJHL is committed to promoting the role of women in church and society. The Women's Desk—run by a women and directed by a committee of women leaders—has accomplished many things. First, in both Palestine and Jordan, the committee has run many workshops and gatherings on the topic of domestic violence. There has been a noticeable increase in domestic violence in our society, but the issue is not often openly discussed. The group

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<sup>3</sup> At [www.lutheranworld.org/content/resource-lwf-gender-justice-policy](http://www.lutheranworld.org/content/resource-lwf-gender-justice-policy) .

has asked how they can help empower women to address the issue, even if they face domestic violence themselves. Their goal is to build a community of empowered women who will not keep quiet so they can live their lives without fear. But they also know that addressing women's empowerment is not a matter for individuals alone. For this reason, the Women's Desk is coordinating efforts to include gender justice policies in the constitutions in both Jordan and Palestine. They have organized several workshops with civil society leaders and are leading the efforts in both countries.

Building on these successes, the Women's Desk is now moving toward a third goal. In cooperation with the Secretary for Women in Church and Society at the LWF, they are now working on contextualizing the LWF Gender Justice Policy in the Palestinian and Jordanian contexts. The first step is to translate it into Arabic. This contextualizing strategy will allow us effectively to put the policy to work in our context. I endorse this process for all member churches of the LWF. Without being contextualized in Palestine, Brazil, Indonesia and other regions of the LWF, the Gender Justice Policy would simply be a document on a shelf. But gender justice is too important for us to let that happen.

In many cultures a broad acceptance of the LWF principles for gender justice will take a long time. This is also true for my own context, Palestine. Nevertheless, that does not stop the ELCJHL and its related ministries and programs from building the structures now. We are taking important strides toward realizing gender justice. In our context, it is difficult not to recognize that the strongest voices for achieving a just and enduring solution come from politicians who are women.

The issue of gender justice is a vital challenge for the churches today. All persons—men and women, boys and girls, regardless of gender identity—are equal before God. They are of equal worth. Human beings are not for sale. I hope that as we commemorate the Reformation in 2017, we will come to the table with all of our member churches having contextualized the Gender Justice Policy so that we shout together in the face of the world, “Human beings are not for sale!”

## **CONCLUSION**

Today, our world is struggling to honor the equality of each human being before God. Our God-given equality and dignity mean that no human being can ever be accepted as being for sale. No human trafficking scheme, no sexual exploitation, no unjust system of labor can ever escape God's judgment through the critical engagement of God's church. Neither refugee crises nor the wars that give rise to such emergencies are ever acceptable in God's eyes.

We live in a fallen and broken world where human beings and the conditions in which humans live are bought and sold on a daily basis. Our shared future is being sold to benefit corporations that pollute our atmosphere and accelerate the change of our shared climate. The church must stand strong, rejecting the callous calculations of profit alone.

Our dignity—and indeed the dignity of creation itself—is found in the image of God. Because the Son of God, Jesus Christ, became incarnate of the Virgin Mary, we know that the image of God is not found in strength alone, but also in weakness and vulnerability. Because Jesus dies on the cross, shedding his blood, we know that he made all of us—regardless of gender, ethnicity, race, religion, ability or any human characteristic—free and equal. We thus strive to preserve the dignity of each and every human being we encounter. The Reformation is not yet finished. The church still needs to be purified and brought into greater alignment with the gift of God in Christ Jesus.

## QUESTIONS

*Are there refugees present in your community? In what ways do government or church agencies respond to their needs?*

*In what ways is it meaningful to you that the president of our global Lutheran communion is a refugee?*

*The first mission of the Lutheran World Federation was to care for refugees affected by wars in Europe. What implications does this have for your understanding of our mission together for the sake of the world?*



# LEADERSHIPS CAPABLE OF RESPONDING TO GOD'S CALL

*Gustavo Driau*

Between 2010 and 2013 the Latin American and Caribbean Sustainability Program of the Lutheran World Federation accompanied various Lutheran churches in Latin America and the Caribbean that requested support for their own work on organizational sustainability. During that period, some forty accompaniment events took place, including workshops, encounters, group meetings, one-to-one meetings, the production of reports and materials, recording experiences, etc.<sup>1</sup>

This paper is to a large extent based on the presentation made at the Informants' Encounter/Seminar on Management and Leadership in Sustainable Churches, which took place in August 2014, at São Leopoldo, and was jointly organized by the LWF's Latin American and Caribbean Sustainability Program and the Sustainability Institute of Latin America and the Caribbean.

## **MODELS AND CHANGES**

Let me start with the question, Why are some organizations, churches and faith communities capable of surmounting the challenges of their context and succeed in going forward with their mission, while others fail to respond to changes and put their viability at risk?

Churches and their organizations rely on experienced leadership, have companions on the journey who advise them, and are also accompanied

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<sup>1</sup> At <http://issuu.com/programasustentabilidad/stacks>.

by partner organizations and churches. Even so, many go into periods of decline and crisis. We see how some are capable of turning around, while others find it difficult to recover.

One of the crucial elements in being able to respond to the contextual is the ability to perceive the problems. Contexts change, are uncertain, complex, interrelated and varied. This requires the ability to discern the local context, as was expressed in the 2004 LWF document *Mission in Context*:

For an effective contextual and holistic mission, the church is challenged to engage in context discernment and analysis at local and national levels, keeping in mind the impact of global and regional factors on local contexts.<sup>2</sup>

It is thus necessary to understand, take note of and interpret changes in the context, with the aim of producing responses that are focused on contextual mission.

In light of the sustainability processes within the churches, we need to assess whether our leadership is capable of perceiving the challenges of contexts or, on the contrary, whether our paradigms, mental models and previous judgments hamper or slow down our perception and the actions that we need to take.

The vastness of what surrounds us is immeasurable, as can be seen in the Psalms (i.e., Ps 8, 96, 144), and human beings have a limited capacity to process the facts arising from their contexts. We cannot know everything, we cannot perceive everything and, in order to make sense of our world, we need simpler images of our situation. These simplified images—what some call “mental models”—are deeply rooted suppositions and representations, influencing our way of understanding the world and of making decisions.

This representation of reality functions like a retina, which, while helping us to see certain facts about our situation, holds us back from perceiving others.

In light of our limitations in perceiving and processing everything that is happening around us, these representations enable individuals and organizations to give meaning to their contexts (understanding them), which then allows one to decide how to act in that particular setting. Thus, some of these “retinas” or mental models help us to discern, to have a panoramic view of and to understand our context, while others stand in our way of it.

When we are thinking about leadership in sustainable churches, we need initially to become critically aware of these retinas through which we read reality, and to note that we carry with us certain particular mental models.

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<sup>2</sup> *Mission in Context*, at [www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DMD-Mission-in-Context-EN-low.pdf](http://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DMD-Mission-in-Context-EN-low.pdf), 10.

Obviously, if we were to recognize that we are carrying with us a particular retina through which to read reality, then we could choose to change it.

In the biblical experience of the People of God, changes are initiated by a vision inspired by God. Moses, on his journey to the Promised Land, Paul, in his missionary work, and Jesus himself are guided by visions that are not merely human but inspired by God.

As stated in 2007:

The basic sustenance of the church is ensured by the redemptive action and the continued creative action of God in time. It is in this confidence that men and women in all ages have dared to take on their own role and responsibility in the different aspects of the life of the church, in that way responding to God’s call to become a new community (baptism), to build it and as such to share in God’s mission, offering their own gifts for the work.<sup>3</sup>

As human beings we are confronted with the paradox of being at the same time both dependent and responsible. Sometimes, we tend simply to abdicate our responsibility, leaving it to God to do it all for us, and thus not to take any action. At others, we tend to forget our dependence and take on responsibility without God.

The church’s activity is paradoxical in so far that, as it carries out its contribution to God’s mission, it is called to stress both our human dependence on God and our human responsibility of being those who carry out the task.

Processes of change, empowerment and reconciliation are essential experiences in the lives of individuals, society and the church. It is God who imparts the vision for change and guides and empowers the process of transformation.

The grace of God that stimulates processes of change, empowerment and reconciliation is not limited to the church alone but available to all. At the same time, as baptized persons, we have been given the responsibility to be stewards and to implement these changes. Throughout the Bible, God frequently entrusts individuals with the task of achieving change, a task which is sometimes lifelong or requires one or more generations. Change, empowerment and reconciliation do not happen in an instant but are long-term and costly processes.

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<sup>3</sup> *Con Confianza en el Porvenir* [With confidence in the future], Sustainability Program document, COL, 2007. See [www.est.edu.br/sustentabilidad/pdfs/Con-confianza-en-el-porvenir-extenso.pdf](http://www.est.edu.br/sustentabilidad/pdfs/Con-confianza-en-el-porvenir-extenso.pdf) <https://sustentabilidad.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/trusting-in-the-future-eng.doc>

## CONTEXTS

Churches are located in particular places, and places change, including shifts in social life, culture, the economy, science, politics and also in aspects of faith and spirituality. We live in a world community in which there is little solidarity, with the poorest members of the community, who suffer exploitation, oppression and war and, even worse, exclusion. Individuals, and whole social groups, are written off as expendable, unemployable, non-citizens.

In a world system where the extreme interests of finance and the markets predominate, human life, justice, dignity and rights do not easily find their way onto the world agenda as priorities, and questions regarding the purpose of human life have little room.

We live in the midst of a culture misused for instant gratification, entertainment and excessive leisure that attempts to fill people's entire lives. It is a culture of success, of coming out on top—even if this is achieved through corruption and crime—one which worships prestige, power and social status. The predominant individualism weakens community ties, since in urban areas many forms, values and lifestyles exist side by side and do not relate to one another. Urbanization and migration caused by poverty result in a breakdown in identity, solidarity and healthy relationships.

In face of these challenges, **God is in mission:**

This God in mission, who creates and sustains the universe and yet becomes vulnerable in and at the hands of God's own creation, is a Triune God. Trinity describes "God in mission" as always a God for others; namely, the whole of humankind, the world, the entire creation.<sup>4</sup>

In face of these challenges **God is not idle:**

The Holy Spirit transforms human words proclaiming the Good News, the water of baptism, and the bread and wine of the Eucharist into signs of Christ's presence in the church, empowering the church for God's mission. The Holy Spirit equips Christians and the whole church with a diversity of gifts (1 Corinthians 12; Romans 12; Ephesians 4). Equipped with these spiritual gifts (charismata), they are able to proclaim the gospel and share the life described by the gospel with all peoples in every place. All of the Spirit's gifts – preaching, teaching, healing, prophecy, administration, and others given to women and men – are intended to strengthen the communities of God's gathered people, congregations, for inner growth and holistic mission.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Op. cit. (note 2), 24

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 27

Through baptism, individuals are included in the new covenant of the people of God and are changed and empowered by the gifts of the Spirit (charismata), as instruments of God’s loving purpose for all creation. With that, Luther forcefully links his theology of the universal priesthood of all believers with the ‘*missio Dei*’, God’s mission, as it is particularly expressed in the work and merits of Christ. Through baptism and by means of the gifts of the Spirit, each individual participates in that mission, which originates in God and is incarnated in the world in Christ.<sup>6</sup>

One of the contributions to God’s mission is working to improve the sustainability of faith communities and churches. This involves being able to count on a leadership capable of perceiving the challenges of the context, leaving aside the retinas that obstruct and restrict our vision. The call God makes to us requires a leadership capable of foreseeing future scenarios, analyzing problems and long- and medium-term possibilities, building networks, developing resources and facilitating processes and not simply dealing with day-to-day problems.

Changing contexts present communities and churches with new interrelated and complex problems. In this context, leadership cannot be developed if individuals or groups in the organization behave as if they were silos, that is, enclosed spaces, connected only among themselves. Sustainable leadership is developed by identifying, making visible and connecting the different sectors and levels of churches and their organizations. There is an obvious incompatibility between the idea of the church as the body of Christ (as described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 12) and the development of a leadership based on individuals, segments or groups as if they were such silos.

That term silo is a metaphor suggesting a similarity to the tall grain storage cylinders that keep one type of grain separate from another and from the outside world. Parts of the church do all they can to remain separate and isolate. In an organization suffering from this silo syndrome each part interacts mainly within the silo, and not with other groups in the same organization, nor with the outside world, or its context.

This silo syndrome makes it impossible for relationships between congregations, districts, synods, programs, projects and civil society, etc. to produce healthy growth in the church. It is, however, one of the mental images that we carry with us: each part is isolated and considers itself more important than the whole.

Another of the mental images that we carry with us is the one that regards leadership as being located in the individual traits of a particular

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Junge, *Baptism, Universal Priesthood and Ordained Ministry*, 2007, at [http://issuu.com/programasustentabilidad/docs/baptism\\_\\_universal\\_priesthood\\_\\_and\\_/1](http://issuu.com/programasustentabilidad/docs/baptism__universal_priesthood__and_/1)

person or the characteristics of a particular position. This is a retina that, when it thinks of leadership, thinks in terms of individual leaders. That presupposes an idea of leadership as residing in a person, who takes on the directing and coordinating of an activity or ministry in the church and who has been appointed to that role by one or a group of persons. Such a person is confident of the approval of the church, but only until problems arise and their work is criticized, and competition and power struggles arise.

Being church in the present challenging context demands joint leadership, group involvement and collaborative work with the commitment of and participation by all the groups and parts constituting the church and contributing to processes of change, in which vision, mission and values are shared.

Leadership in sustainable churches is a whole collection of processes that motivate the action of many individuals toward fulfilling the call given by God in that context. Leadership is thus a dynamic interactive process that takes place within a group or organization or a network of organizations. It is thus a leadership that is aware of the wide extent of inter-relations, perspectives, limits, encouragement, discouragement, collaboration and conflict in the midst of which the work has to be done.

Leadership in sustainable churches is a leadership that is mainly collaborative and collective, with a range of abilities to encourage, help and organize, facilitate processes, motivate baptized members and create networks within and outside the church.

Thus, with regard to sustainability in the church, when we think of leadership, we are not thinking exclusively of individuals, but in terms of the effectiveness of the leaders as a whole, i.e., paying attention to developing groups, teams, bodies and meetings, bearing in mind all the baptized who are part of the community (whether it be a congregation, parish, church or world communion).

There is, without doubt, a need to help leaders, or potential leaders, to develop their own abilities, but there is a real danger of defining leadership training exclusively, or mainly, in terms of the aptitude of individuals. In the area of organizational sustainability we have to think of developing leadership abilities in working groups, governing boards, committees, councils, pastoral and ministerial groups, etc.

## **JESUS AND LEADERSHIP**

Thinking in terms of leadership development for a sustainable church is a much wider issue than thinking merely of leadership training or ministerial training. Leadership as a process in the life of a community involves sharing responsibilities and decision making and encouraging commitment between baptized members.

The hierarchical concept of leadership results in a structure of positions. Thus elder, prophet, bishop, pastor are all titles designating positions in the church. However, the vision that emerges from the New Testament is focused on functions. Authority comes from the Holy Spirit and from gifts, spiritual maturity and the service given by each member. Leadership as service focuses on functions instead of on positions, is task-oriented and not based on titles or responsibilities. The stress is on what is done—catechizing, pastoring, preaching—and not on the person responsible, such as the catechist, pastor, preacher. The hierarchical concept of leadership uses nouns, whereas the model of leadership as a function uses verbs.

After the disciples James and John had asked Jesus to allocate to them the most important seats beside his throne, he answered, “It will not be so among you.”

But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many (Mt 20:25–28).

But he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves (Lk 22:25–27).

Jesus’ words call into question not only the leaders of the nations as such, but also the hierarchical form of leadership in that context. Jesus rejected leadership on the basis of power and the exercise of authority from above.

“It will not be so among you,” emphasizes that it is the community that is responsible.

The community of the faithful, the church, is called to organize itself. There is a phrase that often appears in the New Testament: one another. “Love one another”; “support one another”; “pray for one another”; “forgive one another”; “bear one another’s burdens.” That phrase, one another, is an image of the Triune God, and it is the image that Jesus used for the constitution of the church. This image, left to us by Jesus, shows us that exercising leadership is a mutual, reciprocal and interdependent relationship of one to another.

Leadership in the sustainable churches lies in each baptized member of the church and not in a distinct person or group. Leadership in sustainable churches is based on a relationship of mutuality, companionship,

participation, belonging, fulfilling obligations, authority, celebration and the mutuality of giving and receiving.

Leadership in sustainable churches implies lay persons, ministers, women, youth, elderly, people with only one talent and people with many talents relating to one another and mutually sharing tasks—tasks that will never be perfect. They will reach agreements, plan, carry out joint activities, be mutually accountable and together celebrate, one with another.

## **LEADERSHIP WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN SUSTAINABILITY PROGRAM**

Leadership is a dimension of the development and sustainability of churches that would deserve much more reflection and biblical, theological and organizational study. Meanwhile, within the framework of the Latin American and Caribbean Sustainability Program, we have identified, albeit in a practical way, some of the marks and features of leadership that make a powerful contribution to the sustainability of churches. At present what we are in a position to communicate is mainly empirical knowledge, based on our experience during the years 2010–2013, together with those Lutheran churches of Latin America and the Caribbean that requested some sort of accompaniment under the Latin American and Caribbean Sustainability program.

### **APTITUDES AND ABILITIES**

Within the framework of the Sustainability Program we have been able to identify some features of the ways in which leadership contributes to sustainability processes in the churches. We have put them into two groups:

- **Aptitudes:** an inclination, tendency or spiritual aptitude and (mental) understanding for seeing, perceiving, distinguishing and relating to the various aspects that make for the organizational sustainability of one's church.
- **Abilities:** the resources of individuals and the church to carry out a task and to perform certain activities.

### **APTITUDES**

The church leadership that has gone through processes of change and development in its organizational sustainability has a certain aptitude, predisposition, inclination and pro-active quality in some aspects. It

- **Reads its context (both immediate and more distant) and reflects on it.** This form of leadership is not afraid to reflect on and recognize the changing context in which there is increasing complexity and interdependence between actors and issues; reflects on these challenges together with others, and not only on broader contexts (at a distance), but also on immediate contexts—its own neighborhood and community of faith, i.e., parish life. The opposite of this aptitude to read the context is to look down, remain inward looking, enclosed as in a silo. The aptitude to read the context contributes to understanding the call which God sends us here and now, and visualizes and analyzes the situation of the community vis-à-vis the challenges of the situation.
- **Discerns out of awareness of its identity.** This form of leadership seeks to discern its context out of its confessional, ecumenical and cultural identity and thus contributes to a shared vision and values that keep organizations cohesive and provides a sense of direction and discernment. It will place its identity in context, with moral integrity and inspire solid trustworthy models in the organization. It thinks critically in order to reflect out of its identity with an awareness of its role and the present moment and seeks clearly to understand the contribution that the church can make to God’s mission.
- **Has a sense of continuity in the long term, and a sense of the church body as a whole.** This form of leadership has a long-term vision and a sense of continuity. It examines the history of its faith community, the church, and communion (the past) and at the same time thinks long term (the future). It does not remain trapped in the day-to-day. It can be characterized as having a long-term horizon, common purpose, decentralization processes, and passing on responsibilities to successors.

It does not only think of individuals or groups (my congregation, my pastoral work, ministries), but cherishes the hope of having an impact on the body of the church. It does not only keep in mind the constituent parts of the church but also of the church as a whole. It enables individuals to work together, exchange information, combine knowledge and skills and take decisions as a team in order to confront strategic working challenges to build up organizational resilience and improve sustainability. It focuses on developing leadership across the whole church (not only ordained leaders or only paid workers), seeking to develop mutual, reciprocal (one to another) abilities (coaching and teaching). It is aware that focusing on change, based on the whole body (according to 1 Corinthians 12), results in efforts and changes that will endure.

These capabilities function as a propensity, a collection of ideas and attitudes, generally based on previous experiences, which individuals bring to a situation in order to interpret it. They are the retinas used by the leaderships to give meaning to its situation.

## **ABILITIES**

Three significant abilities that have been identified stand out because of their implications in the field of contextual mission, which, when they are present in the leadership of churches and act in synergy, produce a clear breakthrough and a qualitative leap forward. These are the ability to

- **Develop connectivity, manage networks and facilitate processes:** This implies identifying other players with similar purposes, dialogue and effective collaboration to bring people together, mostly on a temporary basis, to achieve common objectives; working in relationship with networks and systems in the Lutheran communion, ecumenism and local and global civil society.

The leadership that is able to connect with others is aware that sustainable organizations are built on collaboration in alliances and networks, and require a vision formed and shaped by many players, parties and stakeholders. It is capable of seeing relatedness between parts of systems and sub-systems, and how they combine to create an emerging ownership of the whole. It facilitates participative processes that are instructive, increase understanding and stimulate empowerment. Developing the ability to work with others implies becoming aware of the concept of God's mission and putting it into practice.

- **Work in creative and innovative ways:** Creativity and innovation are understood as the ability to find innovative and original ways to solve problems, using the gifts and talents, wisdom, courage and prudence that God gives us to find solutions in a different way. A creative and innovative leadership reshapes sustainably the services that the church is mandated to provide: *diakonia, liturgia, kerygma*.

This kind of leadership stimulates the development of abilities and fresh thinking, not only in groups of traditional, ordained leaders, but also in leadership teams and among staff members. It takes local management initiatives and, at the same time, initiatives to develop systems that strengthen organizational sustainability. It is capable of keeping change in mind, willing to risk taking initiatives and of using the resources available to the full. This kind of leadership is able to adapt and be resilient.

- **Plan, carry out plans and be accountable:** It is important to anticipate what needs to be done and how it will be carried out in order to achieve the goals that have been set. Strategic, participative planning, producing an annual work plan, monitoring, follow-up and evaluation give direction and multiply gifts, abilities and capacities in faith communities, create higher levels of participation, use scarce resources in a better way and make room for follow-up so that plans succeed. Both internal and external factors that might impact the achievement of desired aims are kept in mind by planning. The plans are implemented realistically, setting successive short-term milestones.

This leadership is aware that giving account means the obligation to inform, justify and accept responsibility for the use of the resources put at one’s disposal and for those decisions and actions that have had positive or negative impacts.

Producing accounts implies the ideas of responsibility, transparency, legality and budget control and auditing.

## SUMMARY

Within the framework of the Latin American and Caribbean Sustainability Program we were able to identify, albeit in a practical way, some of the marks and features of leadership that make a powerful contribution to the sustainability of the churches. As an outcome of this process, we have classified them (a) as aptitudes, i.e., a certain retina that enables people to distinguish; and (b) as abilities or skills. Although based on the Latin American and Caribbean experience, we are confident that the same abilities and skills play a crucial role also in other contexts.

The leadership abilities that contribute to the churches’ sustainability include resources and attitudes to carry out the necessary tasks for managing the organization of church communities and organizations. The abilities needed are many and varied, yet three of them play a crucial role: the ability to develop connectivity, manage networks and facilitate processes; to work in creative and innovative ways; to plan, carry out plans and give account of one’s actions. These three pinpointed in this analysis are the ones which, when combined, produce a significant, qualitative breakthrough or leap forward.

They presume certain aptitudes; we have pointed out three: the ability to read one’s context (both immediate and more distant) and reflect on it; to discern out of an awareness of one’s identity; to have a sense of continuity in the long term, and a sense of church body as a whole.

As mentioned above, the experiences we analyzed enabled us to compile only a list of practical learnings, i.e., knowledge based on experience and

practice, and thus on what we have observed. It is not based on academic research and further research is needed to analyze the leadership characteristics in the churches involved in sustainability processes in Latin America and the Caribbean.

The next, medium-term, objective would be for the churches themselves to be able to regard those characteristics as necessary to develop leadership in their organizations and contribute to their sustainability. This means that faculties, study centers and seminaries that train church leaders should include courses on these aspects of leadership and management in their curricula and programs.

## QUESTIONS

*How would you describe the role of the church leadership in your context?*

*How could laity support participatory leadership in the church? What kind of abilities and aptitudes should it have for this?*

*According to Lutheran understanding, why is it important to have a governing structure in the church that is synodical and includes laity?*

# CONVIVIALITY: A CORE VALUE OF DIAKONIA

*Ulla Siirto*

## INTRODUCTION

Globalization and the principle of the maximization of profit constitute a global challenge to which the worldwide Lutheran church is trying to respond. At the experiential level, everything—including the human being—appears to be for sale. What can people do to protest against this harsh reality?

From its very beginning, the Lutheran church has been a protestant church. In other words, the Lutheran church is one that does not content itself with the experienced “order” of the world that is defended by the agents of the respective order either verbally or, if this does not suffice, by use of force.

“Protestant” does not only imply opposition. It derives from the Latin “protestare,” meaning “to testify in favor of something or somebody.” The New Testament is the testimony of God’s love for people that manifests itself in Jesus Christ’s words and deeds. To a great extent, Christ’s deeds are deeds of compassion. His whole being can be understood in terms of *kenosis*—Christ leaves heaven in order, out of mercy, to share people’s earthly existence. He becomes a human being with all that this implies (Phil 2). In his resurrection he empowers people for a new existence and renewed relationships with their neighbors.

“Conviviality” is a diaconal concept that expresses this renewed Christian and evangelical way of life. In the following, I shall outline some aspects of conviviality, as they are understood by modern diaconal and social science research.

## PROCESSING DIAKONIA FROM DIFFERENT REALITIES

Diaconal actors from all over Europe are taking part in preparations for the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation. In a participatory process, facili-

tated by the Lutheran World Federation, a group of diaconal workers, the solidarity group, reflected on diaconal work in the context of a changing Europe under the motto, “Seeking Conviviality—Re-forming Community Diakonia in Europe.”<sup>1</sup>

Mapping the changing European context, the solidarity group recognized that various social, economic and political changes have become increasingly globalized and therefore, in one way or another, affect all European countries. Some of these changes have, for example, driven entire nations to the brink of bankruptcy, created new flows of migration and have led to rising income inequality. At the same time, local communities and many neighborhoods have become home to people from very different cultural backgrounds.

Stories from different working contexts, background reading and research enabled the solidarity group to look at the changing realities in Europe and challenged the group to look at its task from different perspectives. First, the group named economic, social and political changes, even crises, as contextual challenges which affect people’s daily lives. Second, the group noted that the young and the elderly have to pay the highest price for these changes. Third, the group acknowledged the impact of worldwide migration and the fact that some people are forced to endure extreme conditions. Last, but not least, a growing number of people are being excluded and thus remain “hidden” from mainstream society and the organizations that offer social support.

After looking more deeply and analytically at different contexts, the solidarity group identified some common themes that were visible in different realities and from which they selected four core themes: vocation, justice, dignity and conviviality in light of which the group started to study diakonia in a changing society and in different communities. The first three themes are very often connected to diakonia, but the latter provides a new perspective for looking at the core of diakonia. Its meaning is close to the Spanish word, *convivencia* and the German word, *Konvivenz*.

Conviviality was first mentioned by Ivan Illich in his book *Tools for Conviviality*.<sup>2</sup> Illich underlines that the concept describes the autonomous and creative communication both between people and between people and their environment. The solidarity group further developed the concept of conviviality, defining it as the art and practice of living together in solidarity. The art and practice of living together has given rise to a new challenge, especially in light of increasingly diverse communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Addy (ed.) *Seeking Conviviality—Reforming Community Diakonia in Europe* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2013), at [www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DMD-Seeking\\_Conviviality\\_Diakonia\\_Europe.pdf](http://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DMD-Seeking_Conviviality_Diakonia_Europe.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

## FROM HOSPITALITY TO CONVIVIALITY

While the concept of hospitality has repeatedly been featured in the discussion on strangers and immigration, we can also understand it in relationship to all relations with the “other”—with people who are “strange” or “different.” For instance, an example would be the way in which the understanding of conviviality challenges the use of the concept of hospitality in the context of migration. Hospitality plays a prominent role in the biblical tradition and according to it guests or strangers should be treated better than one’s own people or family representatives (i.e., Gen 18–19; Heb 13:2). The concept also provides a basis for understanding the way in which we treat other people.

In 1997, the philosopher Jacques Derrida, himself also an immigrant, wrote about hospitality in *De l’Hospitalité* (published in English in 2000 under the title *Of Hospitality*).<sup>3</sup> For Derrida the concept of hospitality is a problematic one. He points out that, on the one hand, once guests have been integrated to the extent that they become similar to the population they cease to be guests and hospitality disappears. On the other, hospitality also disappears there where the “native” population does not set any conditions for the newcomers and lets them live their lives however they want.

The concept of hospitality has a further problematic connotation. It involves the assumption that the guest is merely visiting and will be leaving some day for another place. But, what about the situation when the guest has come to stay? Would they not become co-residents? In this event, is hospitality still a valid concept?

Instead of hospitality, the concept of conviviality implies that in one way or another all communities are diverse and residents must learn the art and practice of living together and respecting each other’s differences. In a convivial society people not only tolerate but accept differences, and have mutual respect for one another. Day-to-day sharing enables us to learn from one another and by exposing our identity to other identities we can build mutual relationships with those who are different from us.<sup>4</sup>

A number of studies have shown that people like to be with those who are similar. This is visible in the segregation of neighborhoods, the forming of friendships and the way in which people spend their free time. Yet, the art of living together involves a conscious learning process. Members

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<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, transl. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), at [www.clas.ufl.edu/users/burt/shipwreck/derridahospitality.pdf](http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/burt/shipwreck/derridahospitality.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Theo Sundermeier, “Konvivenz als Grundstruktur ökumenischer Existenz heute,” in *Missionswissenschaftliche Forschungen*, Neue Folge 3 (1995).

of a community have to transcend the barriers that they have constructed between different people and worldviews. Very often this involves leaving one's own comfort zone.

The notion that people are too different to live together also needs to be called into question. In today's changing societies, the art and practice of living together have to be learnt. People cannot continue to erect barriers; we have seen that this is a recipe for disaster. Conviviality is part of the essence of every human being. All people are created in the full diversity of God's own image and by getting to know one another and by acting together people join in God's creative work. However, the art and practice of living together require curiosity and a willingness to learn from one another. Research has shown that communities living side by side generally are more tolerant than those communities that do not have this experience. This would suggest that conviviality is learnt over time.<sup>5</sup>

### **CONVIVIALITY: LIVING TOGETHER IN SOLIDARITY**

The word "solidarity" adds a further perspective to the concept of conviviality. Solidarity means sharing, and giving up one's own self-centeredness. This, however, is not charity. Charity can easily imply a control dimension. Solidarity implies a mutual effort to create a better environment for living together and, by extension, to create a better world. Solidarity implies joint activities for the common good. It assumes that everyone tries better to understand their own motives and hopes as well as those of others. Such joint learning processes can help to identify shared understandings and differences which, in turn, will help to build community and raise awareness of topical issues.

In *Why Can't we Live Together?*,<sup>6</sup> the award-winning professor of social psychology Miles Hewstone, who has studied conflict areas, distinguishes between the possibilities for encounters and meaningful encounters. He believes that possibilities for encounters do not constitute commonality. Rather, it is meaningful encounters that are significant since they prevent prejudice and create empathy. Already knowing one "different" person will help increase the understanding and acceptance of those who are different.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Madeleine Bunting, "If you don't think multiculturalism is working, look at your street corner," in *The Guardian*, 16 March 2014, at [http://timeli.info/item/1227726/The\\_Guardian\\_Comments/If\\_you\\_don\\_t\\_think\\_multiculturalism\\_is\\_working\\_\\_look\\_at\\_your\\_street\\_corner\\_\\_\\_Madeleine\\_Bunting\\_\\_\\_\\_\\_](http://timeli.info/item/1227726/The_Guardian_Comments/If_you_don_t_think_multiculturalism_is_working__look_at_your_street_corner___Madeleine_Bunting_____)

<sup>6</sup> [www.thersa.org/large-text/events/video/vision-videos/why-cant-we-live-together](http://www.thersa.org/large-text/events/video/vision-videos/why-cant-we-live-together)

In turn, Paul Gilroy suggests that the concept of conviviality brings a new aspect to the discussion on diversity. According to Gilroy, conviviality is associated with living interactive processes. He claims that many problems can be solved by mutual encounters that help to create a feeling of “sameness.” When people are united by a common cause they can move beyond other differences. It is possible to identify these kinds of common causes or issues within local communities such as, for instance, when people start to work and fight together in order to improve their situation.

Alongside this, it is important to note that conviviality relates to the atmosphere and feeling between people.<sup>7</sup> Sharing and learning together inevitably lead to joint celebrations in communities.

## CONVIVIAL DIAKONIA

As societies change, churches are challenged anew and social problems become increasingly acute. Diaconal work (and the wider work of churches) must be open to the social realities such as poverty and marginalization that affect many people and, in some instances, whole communities and regions. Members of churches should live as a church in the midst of the people and work with them toward bringing about social change.

Change can be implemented in the diaconal church that builds bridges between local communities and people from very different walks of life. A diaconal church can create space for and processes of learning. Furthermore, it can engage those who are unemployed as community builders and in voluntary community-based work. The diaconal church is rooted in motivation, attendance and participation which arise from experience, relationships and faith.

The solidarity group noted that in diakonia reflection and action are based on the four themes mentioned above: vocation, justice, dignity and conviviality. On the one hand, the call comes from God and, on the other, from those who are suffering. To recognize the other and different kinds of realities requires awareness which enables us to start working together with local people in order to bring about change. Living together in solidarity is based on respectful interaction and reciprocity.

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<sup>7</sup> Amanda Wise, “Hope and Belonging in a Multicultural Suburb,” in *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 26(1) (2005), 171–86. Amanda Wise & Selvaraj Velayutham, *Conviviality in everyday multiculturalism: Singapore and Sydney compared*, *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (2013), at [www.academia.edu/4391937/Conviviality\\_in\\_everyday\\_multiculturalism\\_Singapore\\_and\\_Sydney\\_compared](http://www.academia.edu/4391937/Conviviality_in_everyday_multiculturalism_Singapore_and_Sydney_compared),

Through diaconal activities, church workers and volunteers encounter many people who pay the price of social injustice. One of the aims of diakonia is to strive for equality and justice. It also implies that diaconal workers practice non-discrimination in relating to people in need and are careful not to misuse their power either in relationships or decision making. Following diaconal values implies that the decent life means applying basic human rights in relationships and structures. Diakonia in practice stands in stark contrast to the consumer society and the market economy by expressing its values in action and promoting alternative ways of meeting needs. It always stays on the side of those who are the most vulnerable. In doing this diakonia underlines that nobody is for sale.

### **TOWARDS THE 500<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE REFORMATION**

The starting point for reshaping of community-based diakonia is the local situation. The diaconal vocation is based on the local church and community life. By working with those who are involved in identifying diaconal activities within the framework that has been developed as a result of the “Seeking conviviality” process, communities that include also those who have been excluded can be created. The art and practice of living together in solidarity is the basis for the diaconal congregation and local diaconal practice. The search for justice is based on a diaconal community where the entire community is looking for justice. Human beings in their diversity are created in the image of God and thus possess a God-given dignity. Moreover, the existence of Christ, who incarnated under the terms of *kenosis*, encourages us to become humane ourselves and to stand up against the commercialization of our fellow human beings. “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal 5:1). Therefore, all are valuable. The re-formation of diakonia also requires that local actions are supported. It is important that people receive training in order to practice in this new context and in future also advocate for themselves.

The process of re-forming diakonia continues. It fits well under the main theme of the Reformation Anniversary, “Liberated by God’s Grace.” Conviviality only describes one aspect of this liberation. The European solidarity group has been divided into three thematic areas that reflect its work on salvation, the human being and creation, all sub-themes of the Anniversary, underlining that none of them—neither salvation nor human beings or creation—is for sale. One of the thematic groups is considering concrete steps related to conviviality; another is exploring the understanding of what is needed for a convivial economy; the third is working on a

convivial theology, carried by the *kenosis* of Christ and the liberation he brought to people. In the years leading up to the Reformation Anniversary the solidarity group will work in these three concrete areas, which will assist in the diaconal activities of the churches.

## QUESTIONS

*What does conviviality mean in your local context and what can you do together with other people in order to strengthen it?*

*What are the issues which might pose a threat to conviviality in your context?*

*What added value does the concept of conviviality bring to theology and spirituality?*



# GOD'S REPENTANCE—HUMAN BEINGS ARE NOT INTERCHANGEABLE COMMODITIES

*Douwe Visser*

The Lord said to Moses, "Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely; they have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them; they have cast for themselves an image of a calf, and have worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" The Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation." But Moses implored the Lord his God, and said, "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, "It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, "I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever." And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people (Ex 32:7-14).

## **MOSES IN DIALOGUE WITH GOD**

In this passage we read about an exchange between God and Moses that is within the limits of what can be said about and to God. The translation softens it considerably but God says something that God regrets and with-

draws in the same passage. The words “the Lord changed his mind” are a weak translation of the original Hebrew that clearly implies that God regretted what had been said. This is a far cry from a theological thinking about God according to which it is impossible for God to regret something because God is omnipotent and omniscient. Therefore, many claim that this passage is a rather primitive anthropomorphic way of speaking about God. It is a way of keeping theological thinking apart but, like others, I prefer to read the passage in that rough and “primitive” understanding. What we read is that God says something terrible and that Moses wants, by all means, to prevent God from being unfaithful to the promise of salvation. For God the people of Israel seem to be interchangeable. The Israelites will not only be destroyed (except for Moses) but God will create a new and even better nation. The words “for sale” are perhaps not applicable in the literal sense, but the aspect of being an interchangeable commodity certainly is. God can do without Israel.

## **GOD REPENTS**

From the perspective of the covenant, what Israel did is unacceptable. The Israelites regarded God as a commodity; for them, God is for sale. They regarded the golden calf as something better. So is God not allowed this *quid pro quo*? The answer is no, God is not. In Matthew 7:11 Jesus says about God, “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” Is there ever a parent who would want to destroy their child? It can and does happen but is destroying one’s own child not the most awful thing that can happen? Children can sometimes make their parents’ lives very difficult but destroying is not part of a parent’s vocabulary when talking about their children. Parents are the child’s source of life. How could they ever willingly take away that life? Whatever the child does, this is not allowed. A child is not a commodity that one can simply eradicate.

God is the source of life for the people of the covenant, Israel. God is in fact the source of life for the earth and all who live on it. For God, every person is a unique being. And the words of Isaiah are fully applicable: “I have called you by your name, you are mine” (Isa 43:1). Being their source of life, God cannot do away with them. That would go completely against the essence of God’s being.

Moses has to “correct” God even though it seems to be strictly off limits for human beings to correct God. In the Bible it is usually the other way around, congruent with the general understanding of the relationship between God and human beings. Nevertheless, in this passage God clearly

has to be corrected, which is what Moses does. And to this plea follows the reaction described in verse 14: “And the Lord repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people” (King James Version).

Of course the word repented, a literal translation of the Hebrew word, is stronger than the words “change of mind.” But even that already goes against a concept of God as the perfect, sacrosanct being. Article 1 of the Belgic Confession, a sixteenth-century Reformed confessional document, states clearly that God is “unchangeable.” God cannot have a change of mind. However, the conflict between a theological concept of God’s “unchangeability” and this passage wherein God clearly has a “change of mind” is in the end of less importance than the conflict between God’s promise to Israel to be their God forever and the change of mind to destroy them and to create a new people. So there is always a conflict between the changeability and unchangeability of God. About God Paul says: “[...] if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself” (2 Tim 2:13). With the destruction of the Israelites God would have become unfaithful and that cannot be.

## THE MEANING OF GOD’S REPENTANCE

Unless this passage is put away as, in Nietzsche’s words, “Menschliches, Allzumenschliches” (human, all too human), the message of God’s repentance is very strong and extremely meaningful. No one can deny that while this repentance is difficult to understand, it almost brings God down and is also unique in its appearance, it means in the end that something very special is said here. The word “repentance” connected to God can only mean that something is out of the question.

Words such as “repent” or “regret” are not the most popular in a society that prefers self-confident people. Managers are not allowed to repent publicly. For instance, when the worst effects of the credit crisis came into the open one hardly heard any bankers openly repent for the evil they had caused. As the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, said: “There hasn’t been what I would, as a Christian, call repentance. We haven’t heard people saying ‘well actually, no, we got it wrong and the whole fundamental principle on which we worked was unreal, was empty.’”<sup>1</sup>

Also, repentance in less public environments is not easy. It is even difficult to “repent” openly to one’s wife, husband and, above all, one’s children. But one has not failed when one repents. One fails when one does not regret one’s failures. When evil is not regarded as evil and we no longer

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<sup>1</sup> [www.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk) .

call a sin what cannot be called otherwise. We should therefore never give up thinking about sin and its consequences. The biblical consequence is repentance but also forgiveness. And most of all: a new way forward. As there was a new way forward for God with the people of Israel and that new way forward had to come. Because, also for God, humans are not disposable. They are not for sale! They are never ripe for destruction; they are not interchangeable goods. What Moses did would in the end have been the task of every praying person: to keep God faithful to God's promise! Our prayers to God should be strong. We should come close to God. When our prayers are said out of the desire for salvation for the earth and those who live on it, then we should not be too modest. The Book of Psalms can inspire us to be radically direct in our prayers.

Based on the firm conviction that for God we are never a disposable commodity, it can also be affirmed that God, also, is not for sale. That God loves us does not mean that evil is not brought to light. God is "corrected" by Moses as a consequence of God's threat to destroy the people of Israel. God's anger itself is not corrected because the Israelites cannot be excused for what they have done.

This passage strongly asserts that God cannot be exchanged. This can be said because of God's reaction to destroy Israel, notwithstanding the fact that God is made to repent for what God has said. This shows that the Israelites have gone too far, but it also affirms that humans are not for sale, because God regrets what God threatened to do. It may indeed be an almost too anthropomorphic way of speaking about God but the message clearly is: for God, human beings are not a commodity; they are not for sale. The conflict within God results in this strong message.

## **REPENTANCE AND GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY**

The words that God showed repentance have been part of numerous exegetical discussions. Certainly, for those who are reading the Bible in a more traditional, i.e., literal way and also from a rather dogmatic perspective when thinking about God, it is difficult to understand that God can repent. That seemed to be so much unlike God! On the other hand, in the same tradition, the fact that God had repented could not simply be brushed away. In the Reformed tradition, certainly, the traditional understanding was for a long time the standard understanding. After seriously struggling with this passage, it was, in the end, understood as a very meaningful sign of God's love for the people of God's covenant. God cannot do away with them and when it seems that God will, God can even be corrected and brought to repent for the evil God has said. But, on the other hand, is this

not contradictory to what, for Reformed theology, is fundamental, namely the sovereignty of God over all life? Does it not mean that God is free to do what God wants?

In Reformed thinking the principle of God's sovereignty went together with God's election and, connected to that, the concept of irresistible grace. Without any doubt these concepts have been subject to serious misunderstanding and even misuse. It has led to a certain degree of fatalism and feeling that we humans have no role to play. God as the sovereign is far above us and does with us what God wants. But, in line with the dialogue between God and Moses, sovereignty is first of all the unchangeable faithfulness of God to keep God's promise of salvation. God will not give that up and therefore we cannot lose faith in God as the ultimate source of life for the earth and all who live on it. That is not for sale.

The earth and those who live on it belong to God. God will not, and cannot, do away with them. For Reformed Christians, it is crucial to underline this message. It is vital to do so in situations where human beings are being offered for sale. Even God cannot do that, let alone us—this is the message we have to proclaim. That is evil one cannot be silent about. It is a situation of great injustice. It denies the sovereignty of God over all of life. This is why Reformed Christians feel so strongly committed to advocating for justice to be done. The commitment to justice is in the genes of Reformed Christians, so to speak. What needs to be added though is that of course this is not unique to Reformed Christians and it is not always done best within the Reformed tradition.

## **GOD'S SANCTIFICATION OF LIFE**

This commitment to justice has to be embedded in the awareness of God's justification, the basis of our life before God, that life is sanctified and that sanctification can only be made visible in a life of justice. Human justice—*iustitia humana*—is a holy matter. When a church, or an organization of churches, cries out for justice, that cry for justice can only be made clear with the assumption that this cry for justice is a holy matter. In a document that deals with the cry for justice one should, however, always start with the biblical and theological foundation of this cry for justice to make clear that this is part of God's work. God has sanctified us to cry out for justice. For an organization of churches, only this biblical and theological foundation can give weight to the cry for justice. It should not start with an economic or political analysis of the situation or, worse, it should not limit itself to such an analysis only. A church statement does not gain importance from a "secular" analysis but, rather, from a thorough biblical

and theological foundation. If, with regard to their commitment to justice, Reformed Christians feel inspired by Calvin they can only make reference to him if they work on the basis of this broad perspective. Otherwise they have a very limited understanding of Calvin.

Not much has to be said in reference to the often critical and negative opinions about Calvin and his theology. In many aspects we cannot follow Calvin uncritically and there is certainly no need to make a saint of him. But it goes too far to see Calvin as a negative thinker. The ultimate goal of Calvin's theology is to serve the whole of life.

## COMMITTED TO JUSTICE

The World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) has raised its prophetic voice against situations of injustice. One can hardly question the legitimacy of this. But there is the risk that this becomes a repetitive process and we need to seek alternatives and solutions. The theme of the 2004 General Council of the WCRC's predecessor, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, was, "That all may have life in abundance." This theme comes from John 10 where Jesus calls himself the good shepherd. It is quite clear that the abundant life the good shepherd gives to his sheep is that they will find pasture. They will not live a life without hardship. The thief, the hired hand, the wolf—they will all come. They could be seen as symbolizing injustice that has to be resisted. But the pasture symbolizes life. Following in his footsteps, Jesus' community will seek to resist injustice. But it will also try to find the pasture. Both are part of the church's live-giving ministry. Also here we have to be aware that it starts with grace. God is the giver of life. There is no need for us to be stressed life seekers. The grace of God sets us free but "the grace that frees is also a grace that forms."<sup>2</sup> It is important to develop practices that will be foundational for what already elsewhere has been called a life-giving ministry. Many of these practices will not be found only in the Christian community. However, within that community they cannot be developed without theological discernment: "A practice must pursue a good beyond itself, responding to and embodying the self-giving dynamics of God's own creating, redeeming, and sustaining grace."<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, this should not mean that Christian practices have to be set apart from other human practices or that the Christian com-

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<sup>2</sup> See Dorothy C. Bass, "Ways of Life Abundant," in Dorothy C. Bass (ed.), *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 28.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

munity has to be set apart from non-Christian communities. God is present in the world and not only in the church. It is obvious that the Christian community can never participate in the life-giving ministry without God. The life-giving ministry of the Christian community is not just a political program but one that will have major political consequences.

It cannot be denied that putting human beings up for sale is unjust. The prophetic voice has to be raised against that. The unique conflict within God, who wanted to do away with God's people, and God's repentance, can only lead to the firm conviction that humans are never a disposable commodity. We should speak out against this evil with the same commitment as once Moses pleaded with God not to put the people of Israel for sale, because that is an evil God repented of.

## QUESTIONS

*Is it possible to say that “God regrets what God has threatened to do”?*

*Should words such as “sin, repentance and forgiveness” be used more often?*

*Is it first of all the task of the church to give a theological and biblical foundation of the commitment of justice?*



# BIBLE STUDY: GALATIANS 3:25-29

*Susan Johnson*

## OPENING PRAYER

Begin by praying together:

Gracious God, as we prepare to read and study your Word, open our eyes to see, our ears to hear, our minds to think and our hearts to feel. Help us to hear you speaking to us through the text and through each other. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

## TEXT

Read aloud Galatians 3:25-29:

But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

**Discuss: What are your first thoughts on reading this text? What words or ideas stick out for you?**

## **THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION AND THE 500<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE LUTHERAN REFORMATION**

Together, the whole Lutheran World Federation—all 72 million members and 144 member churches—are preparing to commemorate the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation. We are doing this together and with ecumenical partners under the theme “Liberated by God’s Grace.” In this Bible study we are focusing on one of the sub-themes, “Human Beings–Not for Sale.”

When we think about “Human Beings–Not for Sale,” one of the first things that we think about is slavery. There are some that would think that slavery no longer exists in our world, but they would be wrong. Slavery still exists and it takes on different forms in different parts of the world.

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), 20.9 million men, women and children around the world are in slavery. Someone is in slavery if they are forced to work through mental or physical threat; owned or controlled by an “employer”; dehumanized, treated as a commodity or bought and sold as “property”; physically constrained or has restrictions placed on freedom of movement. Slavery exists today despite the fact that it is illegal in all the countries where it is practiced.<sup>1</sup>

Forms of slavery include bonded labor, child slavery, early and forced marriage, forced labor, descent-based slavery and human trafficking.

**Discuss: Think about your context? What forms of slavery occur in your region?**

Read Galatians 3:2–29 again.

But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise

**Discuss: What is the text saying to you in your context given the forms of slavery that are present?**

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<sup>1</sup> [www.antislavery.org/english/slavery\\_today/what\\_is\\_modern\\_slavery.aspx](http://www.antislavery.org/english/slavery_today/what_is_modern_slavery.aspx)

## OUR BAPTISM DEFINES US

Martin Luther lectured on the book of Galatians in both 1519 and 1535. As he discussed the verses of our text he focused on how our Baptism into Christ becomes the one thing that defines us. Our Baptisms make us equal to each other, regardless of the ways that others would try to define and demean us. Here are some of his words:

Therefore Paul teaches the Baptism is not a sign but the garment of Christ, in fact, that Christ Himself is our garment. Hence Baptism is a very powerful and effective thing. For when we have put on Christ, the garment of our righteousness and salvation, then we also put on Christ, the garment of imitation.<sup>2</sup>

It is characteristic of human and legalistic kinds of righteousness to be divided into sects, and for distinctions to be made according to works. Some profess, advocate, and pursue this; others, that. In Christ, however, all things are common to all; all things are one thing, and one thing is all things.... Therefore there is neither rich nor poor, neither handsome nor ugly, neither citizen nor farmer, neither Benedictine nor Carthusian, neither Minorite nor Augustinian.<sup>3</sup>

**Discuss: If we are one in Christ, equal in the eyes of God because of the righteousness of Christ which we wear, what difference does that make in the way in which we view and treat each other?**

## GLOBAL ADVOCACY

In his “Small Catechism (1535),” Martin Luther explains the fourth petition of the Lord’s Prayer and expands on the definition of “daily bread” to include everything required for the “necessities and nourishment for our bodies.”

Similarly, our understanding of “Human Beings—Not for Sale,” might be expanded to include anything that detracts from the necessities and nourishment of our bodies. Depending on your context, these might include poverty, war, being a refugee or internally displaced, female genital mutilation, domestic violence, rape, honor killing, unchecked disease, as well as bonded labor, child slavery, early and forced marriage, forced labor, descent-based slavery and human trafficking.

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, “Lectures on Galatians, 1535,” in Jaroslav Pelikan (ed.), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 26 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 353.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, “Lectures on Galatians, 1519,” in Jaroslav Pelikan (ed.), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 27 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 280–81.

Here is some of what the LWF is doing to care for the needs of people. The LWF Strategy 2012–2017 priority themes for global advocacy include: religious freedom and interfaith relations; climate change and environmental protection; gender justice; refugees, internally displaced persons and other forced migrants; oppressed minority populations and indigenous peoples; economic justice; HIV and AIDS.

**Discuss: How do these priority themes relate to Galatians 3:25–29 and to “Human Beings—Not for Sale”?**

## GENDER JUSTICE

The LWF has adopted a Gender Justice Policy and is encouraging its implementation across the communion and in all member churches. It states:

As a community of equals, through baptism, the church is called prophetically to announce and practice inclusion. As we read in Galatians 3:27–28, As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

and,

Humankind, regardless of gender, biology or other conditions, is transformed in Jesus’ grace, forgiveness and new life. Differences of power based on ethnicity, class and gender are changed and transformed through baptism. All are one in Christ.<sup>5</sup>

In a previous LWF document, *Churches say “No” to Violence Against Women*, we were encouraged to “highlight Paul’s commendation of women as co-workers and Galatians 3:28, which emphasizes the end to differences and our oneness in Christ.”<sup>6</sup>

**Read the text again. How might it be calling you to act for justice and human dignity in your context? Discuss.**

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<sup>4</sup> At [www.lutheranworld.org/content/resource-lwf-gender-justice-policy](http://www.lutheranworld.org/content/resource-lwf-gender-justice-policy), 4–5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>6</sup> [www.lutheranworld.org/content/resource-churches-say-no-violence-against-women-action-plan-churches](http://www.lutheranworld.org/content/resource-churches-say-no-violence-against-women-action-plan-churches), 39.

## CLOSING PRAYER

Close your Bible study with the following prayer from the USA or another prayer of your choice.

### **Jesus Heal Us<sup>7</sup>**

**Leader:** Jesus, lover of humanity, you healed the daughter of the Syrophenician woman, a foreigner who came to you, a Jewish teacher. By your gift of life you showed us that we are one people, all worthy to be loved. Now we come to you, as mothers in spirit, praying for the healing of the world, saying:

**All: Jesus, heal us.**

For this country, suffering from the self-inflicted wounds of racism, greed, the genocide of its native people, and the oppression of the poor, teach us that greatness can only be found in justice, generosity and compassion. We pray:

**All: Jesus, heal us.**

For peace among all nations, that the dry bones found in battlefields and the mass graves dug by tyrants rise up as a resurrected humanity, committed to peace and the well being of all on earth. We pray:

**All: Jesus, heal us.**

For your church divided, blundering, often intolerant, we rub our eyes, hoping to clear our vision and keep it ever on you. But we lose ourselves in the mists of delusions, fears and doubts. Send us the guiding light of your wise spirit, the healing of your love. We pray:

**All: Jesus, heal us.**

For all we name now in this assembly who need healing and our prayers: (*those assembled offer names*) And so today as we celebrate the feast of redemption we lift up all the living for your mercy, and thank you for the lives of all our loved ones who now celebrate your glory in heaven.

**All: Amen.**

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<sup>7</sup> By Irene St Onge, San Francisco, California, USA, in *ibid.*, 56-57.



# LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

Ayana, Ebise, M.A., Lecturer in Theology, Mekane Yesus Seminary of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, Ethiopia

Driau, Gustavo, Facilitator of the Sustainability Programme LAC, United Evangelical Lutheran Church (IELU), Argentina

Fabiny, Tamás, Rev. Dr, Bishop, Northern Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hungary, LWF Vice-President for Central Eastern Europe, Hungary

Johnson, Susan, Rev., National Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, Canada

Nüssel, Friederike, Prof. Dr, Director of the Ecumenical Institute, University of Heidelberg, Germany

Siirto, Ulla, Principal Lecturer, Diaconia University of Applied Sciences, Järvenpää, Finland

Visser, Douwe, Rev. Dr, Executive Secretary for Theology and Communion, World Communion of Reformed Churches, Germany

Younan, Munib, A., Rev. Dr, Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, LWF President, Jordan











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