

EN

## Message of the LWF European Pre-Assembly 2023

Oxford, Great Britain 21 – 24 March 2023

**“Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.” (Romans 12:12)**

We met in Mansfield College, Oxford, from 21 to 24 March 2023 as participants in a joint Pre-Assembly of the three LWF European regions. Together, as a communion representing all of the LWF churches on our continent, we have been preparing for the Thirteenth Assembly in Krakow in September, reflecting on its theme of ‘One Body, One Spirit, One Hope’. Together, we have worshiped, shared our joys and sorrows on the road from Windhoek to Krakow and jointly discerned issues affecting us in our various contexts.

We expect the discussions in Krakow to focus on witnessing to hope in the midst of a suffering world. Hope is the affirmation that God is faithful and will complete what God has begun. Hope is a gift of the Holy Spirit, but also a task for us all. With the climate crisis, environmental degradation, war and conflicts, forced migration, economic inequality, populism, authoritarianism and rising nationalism, we find ourselves searching for credible and transformative hope. We need to find a clearer understanding of what Christian discipleship means in this context.

The war against Ukraine, the refugee crisis and other ongoing conflicts are increasingly challenging the churches and our Christian theology. We continue to support a just peace in Ukraine. Many moral and ethical questions are provoked and inequalities revealed. There is a need to work on our theology of peace and self-defense, questioning how we can be peacemakers in our time. At a practical level, LWF responded as one body to the Ukraine crisis and this, for us, is an expression of hope.

We recognize the damage we are doing to our ecosystems, worsening the climate crisis. This is a sin against God's creation. We know that we have not done enough to battle environmental degradation and the loss of biodiversity. The imbalance between those polluting and those suffering its consequences continues to grow. At its core, this is about power and preserving life. Much needs to change, including our own lifestyles and our commitment to addressing inequalities. Climate justice needs to be at the core of all of our considerations. There is a need to work on our ecotheology, to accelerate efforts towards reaching carbon neutrality by 2030 and to advocate more strongly for climate refugees.

The Covid19 pandemic marked a turning point for the churches, affecting all of our communities in multiple ways. We were challenged by rapid learning of new means of communication and being together. While we need to ask if there were losses beyond repair, we also need to identify the gains on which we can build.

As a consequence of these multiple crises, people are increasingly struggling to find meaning in their life or searching for a community where they can belong and feel fully valued. There is more awareness of mental health issues, yet stigma and isolation continue to prevent people from speaking about their needs. As a Communion, we need to work on our theology of mental health and play our role in building reciprocity and mutual care in our localities.

At the same time, these crises have also made us more aware of our call to become a more diaconal church. As European churches, we have been engaged in a fruitful process of Conviviality, learning how to serve our neighbors as we live out our Baptismal vocation.

In a context of declining membership, where we are challenged to remain relevant in responding to people's spiritual needs, we must find new ways of being church. This includes new and more accessible language for our worship and theology, as well as a more effective presence in social media. Our sharing of the Gospel needs to make better use of the gifts present among our youth and lay members, enabling us to reach out and engage with diverse audiences.

In light of the deepening economic crisis affecting our churches, the priorities and role of the LWF needs to be re-evaluated to ensure its sustainability into the future. This is not simply a question of financial resources. We note the introduction of a new mutual accountability process to better define relationships between our churches.

Globally, we witness a push-back on human rights and gender justice. Religion is too often used as an argument to justify the push-back. We also know that the pandemic led to a sharp rise in gender-based violence. As we mark the 10th anniversary of LWF's gender justice policy, we recognize that we have made progress in expressing and accepting diversity as a sign of God's good creation. At the same time, we recognize that there continues to be a great need to talk about human sexuality and act for gender justice within our own midst.

We want to be more inclusive and accessible churches. This means that we need to examine our past and present, dealing more honestly with issues of racism, exclusion and violence. No one should be discriminated against, particularly on the basis of their race, ethnicity or gender. We need to strengthen our own democratic structures and participatory approaches, empowering women, youth and lay leaders and offering more opportunities for intergenerational cooperation.

Rooted in one hope, we are united in one body by one Spirit. We acknowledge the rich diversity within the Communion. For us unity does not mean uniformity. At the same time, it is important to understand the practical implications of living as a communion of Lutheran churches. We need to continue to listen to each other carefully and not to give up on one another for convenience or for indifference. We must find ways of dealing with questions which could be Communion-dividing in courageous and respectful ways. With Christ in our center, we believe that unity in reconciled diversity is possible.

## **Message of the LWF Pre-Assembly in Latin America, the Caribbean and North America**

**Bogota, Colombia 17 – 21 April 2023**

**“One body, one Spirit, one Hope**

(EN) Delegates, advisors, and ex officio councilors of the member churches of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) gathered for the Pre-Assembly of the Latin America and Caribbean and North America regions, April 17-21, 2023, in Bogotá D.C., Colombia. We were welcomed by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Colombia - IELCO, recognizing the theme that summons us, "One Body, One Spirit, One Hope." The rich discussions allowed us to understand the Kingdom of God in unity, a unity that must be intentional, committed, and practiced.

Referring to the "Sulas"

*“A Sula is a place where rapid and heavy water streams collide together against rocks and uneven ground. It is a very beautiful but also dangerous place to be. Anyone standing near a Sula will tell you about the enormous sound it makes. The combination of water smashing into rocks and water falling into itself creates an overwhelming sound that (depending on where one is) can be experienced as restful or terrifying. I imagine the cries and groans emanating from our context like a Sula, a beautiful and dangerous place.”* (Rev. Danielle Dokman, Surinam)

The member churches present at the Pre-Assembly reflected on the contextual challenges, "Sulas" that we experience as a region. For example, polarization; governmental corruption; false information circulating in the media with co-opted journalism and on social networks, which advance with uncontrollable speed; the structural discrimination suffered by vulnerable groups, which we refer to as the cries of a people crying out for justice.

We also identified the role of the economic systems that underlie all these problems, in which patriarchy and fundamentalism are manifested. These systems generate a scandalous level of inequality in our regions, causing a depletion of the creation, for the sake of generating profit. Fundamentalism, in turn, instrumentalizes the fear of change, inclusion, diversity, and equity, and consequently divides our society.

At the same time, we know that the "Sulas" are also beautiful places. In them, encounters of solidarity take place. The Pre-Assembly was an expression of the realities and actions we can all carry out in unity.

While progress has been made, there are still challenges to be addressed. We are aware of our asymmetrical realities between North and South, in the face of which we express possibilities for change. We gather the voices of our churches who cry out for just communities to respond holistically to all kinds of injustices. We commit to creating and transforming ourselves into safe spaces where we can be authentic and dialogue about gender justice, power relations, diversity, sexuality, and faith identity.

Considering just communities and safe spaces, we commit ourselves to promoting intergenerational dialogues and call on the LWF to develop, adopt and implement an intergenerational justice policy to promote youth leadership in communion with the wisdom of other generations

As we mark the 10th anniversary of LWF's gender justice policy, we recognize that much work still needs to be done. In response to the high growth of fundamentalist narratives in our region and situations of violence experienced in our churches, there remains a great need to continue to push for gender justice in our midst. Likewise, the testimonies heard during the Pre-Assembly from Afro-descendant, rural women, and indigenous women from Colombia were a clear example of the different forms of gender violence that compel us to promote gender justice in our societies.

As churches, we must recognize all the diverse parts of the body that form it — women, men, youth, indigenous peoples, migrants, and nature itself — and connect them in an organic way, deepening and broadening the discussions and actions.

We affirm the importance of theological formation in coordination with the centers of theological education and the network of institutions, so that they may incorporate and/or update reflections from diverse contextual perspectives. We propose to this network to develop studies on gender, the context of indigenous peoples, climate change, and migration challenges that affect the churches in the regions, taking into account the different languages spoken. Likewise, we recommend engaging in a contextual interpretation of the Augsburg Confession on the occasion of its 500th anniversary, in order to better understand our confessional roots.

We commit to continue striving to be a Communion that goes out and acts on the margins of society, offering a radical welcome to all, as Jesus taught us. We invite the Thirteenth LWF Assembly to reflect, and not just remain in reflection, but move forward into action in which "the Sulas", the groans of this Communion, are taken into account to provoke a transformation into one body, one spirit, and one living and active hope.

## **Message of the Africa Pre-Assembly of The Lutheran World Federation**

**Nairobi, Kenya, 8-13 May 2023**

**“One Body, One Spirit, One Hope” (Eph. 4:4)**

### **Preamble**

We, representatives of The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) member churches in Africa, met under the theme “One Body, One Spirit, One Hope” to prepare for the Thirteenth LWF Assembly from 8-13 May in the Desmond Tutu Conference Centre of the All Africa Conference of Churches.

We express our appreciation for the leadership of LWF President Archbishop Dr Panti Filibus Musa of the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria, LWF General Secretary Rev. Dr. Anne Burghardt, and LWF Vice President for Africa Rev. Dr Jeannette Ada Maina.

We were equally blessed and appreciated the presence of Zofia Niemczyk of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Poland, the host church of the Thirteenth Assembly, staff of the LWF Communion Office and ecumenical guests, including Rev. Dr Fidon Mwombeki, General Secretary of the All Africa Conference of Churches.

We listened to insightful presentations and reflections on the Assembly theme: “One Body, One Spirit, One Hope.” We also received compelling messages from the women and youth delegates to the Pre-Assembly.

We are grateful for the fellowship at our meeting and for the spiritual nourishment received through worship with Holy Communion, morning and evening devotions, biblical reflections, songs, and prayers, where we felt the presence of the Holy Spirit.

We were inspired by the message of the LWF General Secretary who reminded us that:

*“Hope is a gift of the Holy Spirit, and the message of hope is awareness that God creator, redeemer, and sustainer knows and loves all creation. Hope liberates from powers and principalities of this world and encourages us to move ahead despite many obstacles surrounding us”.*

### **On the Assembly theme**

Unity in reconciled diversity is underlying all parts of the theme and can serve as inspiration for the joint work and witness of the member churches in Africa.

Based on presentations and conversations on “One Body, One Spirit, One Hope” we urge the member churches to work together for conflict resolution, peace, and reconciliation, to stand with churches exposed to violence and terrorism or internal challenges, always addressing the root causes of conflict and violence. God’s Spirit leads and strengthens us, as we focus on what unites us, not what divides us.

### **Our regional context**

Africa is a religious continent and more than 85% identify as religious and belong religious organizations. For this reason, religion is integral to Africa's self-understanding and the moral orientation of its peoples.

The continent is blessed with human and natural resources and has made significant progress across different spheres of life and society.

The continent faces many challenges, including misuse of religious texts and teachings, economic and political crisis, bad governance, manifest abuse of power, inadequate education, failing health services, decaying infrastructure, harmful traditional practices, sexual and gender-based violence, irregular migration and trafficking, insecurity and terrorism, climate change induced disasters, human rights abuse, and inequality.

Africa is rising to meet these challenges through the implementation of the African Union Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want. Religious leaders and faith communities have contributed to its development and implementation in many countries on the the continent.

### **We observe**

- the increase of division between ethnic groups and tribes, leading to social fragmentation with devastating effects for people's mental health
- misleading theologies where religion and faith are used to justify oppression, exploitation, division, and abuse
- the destruction of life including the commercialization of religion and the spirits of our times that seeks to divide communities and hold them captive. Recent events in Kenya are revealing and show how abuse of power in the name of so-called 'revelations' led to thousands of people following a false prophet who asked them to fast to death.
- the challenges in reduced global funding for the local development work of the churches. At the same time, we see possibilities for new funding through the "localization agenda" accessible to churches for aid and development
- the many painful situations and experiences of women in everyday life, in leadership positions, and in the ordained ministry
- common challenges shared by youth, including but not limited to high rates of unemployment, climate change, gender injustice, lack of support for youth leadership and development from church structures, and social injustices experienced by youth members

### **We call on member churches to**

- reflect on and develop mechanisms to support theological and pastoral education
- reflect on insecurity and terrorism and offer a Christian response that emphasizes God's justice and mercy, and helps us understand that God is actively involved in reconciling a broken world
- pray for an end to violent conflicts in our region, that peace may prevail and abound. We name specially the people and churches of Sudan, South Sudan, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Central Africa Republic, Mozambique, and others
- Encourage churches to accompany each other and foster the exchange of expertise within the member churches in Africa, e.g., through a council of respected leaders and experts, irrespective of age or gender

- Strengthen the Lutheran Development Agency in Africa (LUDAA) to fundraise and mobilize local resources to support the mission and diakonia programs of member churches
- increase joint work in the field of mission, capacity building, and leadership undergirded by the ideals of Ubuntu
- require theological institutions to include gender justice studies in theological training, provide a platform for exchange of materials, and allocate funds to support the capacity building for women in the region
- create intentional spaces for mutual learning among women and youth, especially around the areas of gender justice and digital literacy
- support to the Gender Justice and Women Empowerment Network and contextualize the Gender Justice Policy as well as open up women leadership positions and training in financial management
- commit to work for health and wellness, for gender and economic justice, and request funding support for Women Human Rights Advocacy training with a strong Biblical and theological foundation
- integrate in their policies and implement in practice a 40/40/20 quota of men, women, and youth, to ensure balanced representation across all structures of the churches
- Encourage youth to study theology and invest in the leadership of youth by removing barriers and actively seeking their participation in church leadership

**We call on the LWF and its Communion Office to**

- Facilitate the establishment of a network of theological institutions within the Communion to enable exchange and sharing of resources
- Advocate for financing of climate change mitigation and adaptation initiatives by member churches and call on those responsible for pollution to keep to the promise they made in the “Paris Agreement” and for the operationalization of the “Loss and Damage Fund”
- Create policies for climate justice and intergenerational justice and encourage the member churches to adopt such policies for their own contexts
- Encourage member churches to deliberately implement the 40/40/20 quotas for equal participation across all structures
- Support entrepreneurship through the establishment of vocational training centers and mentorship programs for skills acquisition, including incubation, and to maintain a database of such opportunities

**We call on the governments in Africa**

- Embrace and deepen a culture of governance where resources are equitably distributed for national transformation
- Ensure freedom of religion, so that citizens can safely and securely practice their religion of choice
- Empower religious communities to self-regulate against religious merchants

We **commit** ourselves to the implementation of these proposals in partnership with governments, ecumenical partners, other civil society organizations, and the global communion of Lutheran churches.

**Concluding remarks**

We express our appreciation to the LWF Communion Office for its support and accompaniment in organizing this Pre-Assembly. We express our appreciation for the stewards who have volunteered to help make this Pre-Assembly a success.

We thank the planning committee who prepared the Pre-Assembly.

We express our appreciation for the care and hospitality extended to us by the two host churches, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Kenya, and the Kenya Evangelical Lutheran Church, as well as the leadership of AACC and the management and staff of Desmond Tutu Conference Centre.

We envisage remaining One Body, in One Spirit, and with One Hope as we entrust ourselves to the Holy Spirit and call upon him to help us remain firm in our faith in Christ and the care, healing and reconciliation of the whole of creation.



## **Message of the LWF Asia Pre-Assembly 2023**

**Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 13-19 June 2023**

**“[Make] every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” Eph 4:3**

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) Pre-Assembly of the Asia region was held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, from 13 to 19 June 2023, hosted by the Lutheran Church in Malaysia (LCM) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malaysia (ELCM). This gathering comprised 119 participants from 42 member churches representing 13 countries and supported by the LWF staff. We worshiped together, listened, heard concerns and shared priorities from churches around Asia. Despite Asia being a large continent with numerous contexts and realities, we thank God that this has not been an obstacle to cooperation but rather a dynamic point of convergence.

Looking forward to Thirteenth Assembly in Poland, participants at the pre-assembly discussed the three aspects of the Assembly theme - “One Body, One Spirit, One Hope.” We realize that just as the human body comprises many parts, the church in the Asian region has a diversity of gifts, which engender a focus on similarities in God’s calling and mission. With a strong spirit of fellowship, commitment to diakonia and peace, our hearts come together for the future of the local and global communion. We are called to work toward justice, peace and reconciliation among people divided by religion, gender, age, ethnicity, language, and culture.

### **Living as a religious minority**

One of the major concerns we share as a region is living as adherents of a minority religion. This affects the lives and church work of many, leading to the issue of how Christians can engage more with those from the majority religion. Throughout the many discussions, a recurring theme was how we could work together in the fields of theological education, interfaith relations, gender justice and eco-theology.

We recognize that many within the Lutheran communion in Asia face different degrees of oppression. Many expressed that they are not able to voice their concerns openly, due to risk of imprisonment, disappearances, and other consequences. Restrictive government policies limit freedom of speech, increase oppression, and attempt to eliminate opposing voices who raise legitimate concerns affecting society. These policies and pressure from radical groups prevent us from living our faith freely, and violate human rights. Many countries in Asia, where LWF member churches are present are affected by restrictive policies, laws and practices. The spaces to publicly discuss these concerns are severely limited and can be sensitive with implications for the safety and security of the citizens of some countries and areas in which we live and serve.

We also considered other minorities, including the differently-abled, who often experience difficulties in daily lives that need to be alleviated and accorded greater inclusion in congregational life.

We call upon the LWF Assembly and member churches to accompany the Asian region in prioritizing dialogue and cooperation between different communities, continuing work already underway in the various programs of serving our neighbor as well as promoting human dignity, justice and peace.

### **The importance of theological education**

We acknowledge that there are obstacles hindering equal opportunities for women in formal theological education. We commit ourselves to focus on strategic areas such as theological teaching at all levels including the congregational level and promoting wider cooperation in theological institutions.

Constructive interfaith engagement should be a special focus of theological education that both continues high level dialogue and features the importance of harmonious daily life encounters with people of other faiths. Youth and adults, women and men should all be involved and equipped to be good neighbors in religiously diverse societies.

On the worsening climate crisis, we urge a greater emphasis on eco-theology at congregational level aimed at building knowledge and enabling actions. We see caring for creation as a common concern, we encourage local churches to incorporate climate justice campaigns in their daily activities.

### **Strengthening gender justice, youth leadership and intergenerational understanding**

As church leaders in Asia, we are grateful for the growing gender equality in our churches, while acknowledging that discrimination against women remains a challenge which must not be ignored. Additionally, there is still discrimination against people of specific ethnicities, and young people are in general viewed as incapable for leadership positions. We urge member churches to act against cultural and societal constraints that prevent equal rights and opportunities for all.

In the Pre-Assembly, we witnessed the vision, commitment and ability of youth and women, which can enrich the communion. Therefore, we ask the Assembly and the member churches to prioritize and actualize our commitment to involve men, women and youth in all levels of decision making and actions, and as well accompany and support member churches in the journey of justice, equality and unity.

In this respect, we encourage the further development of human resources in different areas, through engagement with member churches, in order to enhance understanding and awareness of our mission. Similarly, we encourage member churches to strengthen support to the LWF, by involving members to participate more in regional partnerships, as well as fundraising efforts.

### **Conclusion**

We give thanks to God that the Assembly theme “One Body, One Spirit, One Hope” inspires us to deeper theological reflection and involvement in God’s holistic mission. Our region truly reflects unity in diversity as we work toward building our spirit of oneness. Therefore, our hope is to continue to work together strongly as a region on strengthening theological education, improving interfaith relations, promoting gender justice and youth leadership, addressing political challenges and the climate crisis theologically and becoming good partners in the global Lutheran communion. We look forward to the Assembly where we are able to share our concerns and priorities as well as together commit ourselves to our common mission both locally and globally.