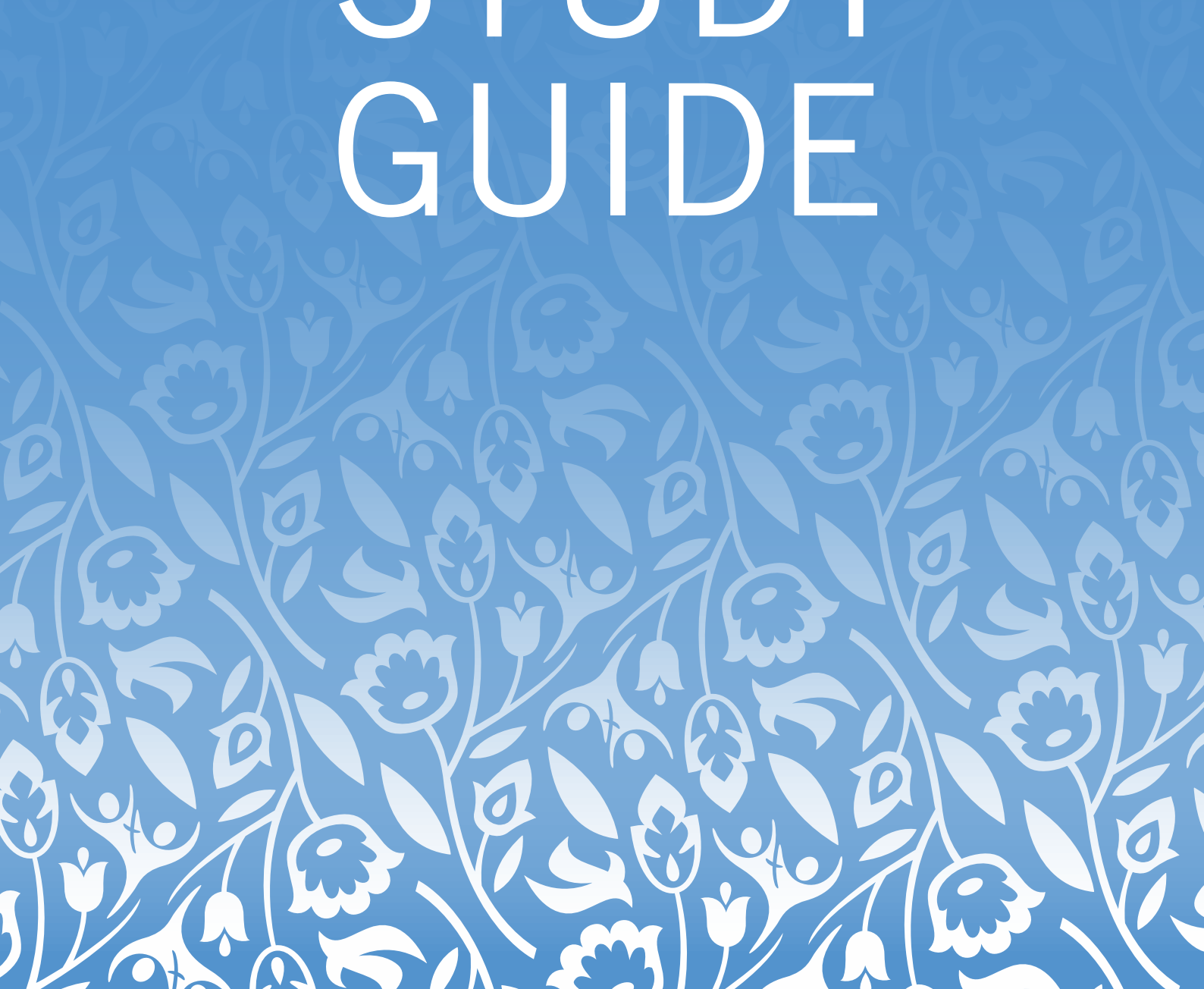




ONE BODY
ONE SPIRIT
ONE HOPE

THIRTEENTH ASSEMBLY
THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION
2023 • KRAKÓW, POLAND

STUDY GUIDE



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LWF Thirteenth Assembly
Kraków, Poland
13-19 September 2023



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THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION
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INTRODUCTION

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) assembles in Kraków, Poland from 13 to 19 September 2023 for its Thirteenth Assembly.

The highest decision-making body of the LWF is a space for member church delegates and other participants to worship, discern, and reflect together on the nature and purpose of our global communion under the Assembly theme—“One Body, One Spirit, One Hope.” The theme is drawn from Ephesians 4:4-6: “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.”¹

The Assembly theme is biblically rooted in an ecumenical dynamic. This *Study Guide* is aimed at preparing churches for the Assembly and inspiring reflections on how the global communion of churches is called and equipped to be a sign of hope in the midst of God’s creation as it participates in God’s holistic mission.

The church’s role in that mission begins with the good news that God does not abandon the world God created but stays with this world through Christ’s incarnation. God is “in” all through God’s indwelling Spirit (Eph 2:22). God is “for” all and continually acts to fulfill God’s promise of life abundant (Jn 10:10). This promise is for all creation, the whole cosmos. The Assembly sub-themes—the Spirit creates, the Spirit reconciles, the Spirit renews—will help interpret the main theme in light of the unconditional promise of God’s love that creates, reconciles, and transforms the world through this cosmic hope.

Each church has a unique context, and, at the Assembly, we seek together what it means to

be one body, in one Spirit, with one hope for our witness and mission. The questions we ask ourselves are inspired by the Lutheran confessional writings, by the Small and Large Catechisms, and by our worship life in Word and sacrament. And today, just as 500 years ago in the creative and generative impulses for reform in the 1520s, we are in a time of confessing. How does confessing the gospel shape our journey ever deeper into communion, not only among ourselves, but with all our neighbors, and with creation?

The world is in urgent need of hearing the gospel of justification, God’s act of grace that liberates us to love our neighbors and all that God has made. We are called into this adventure of living the gospel ever anew in our many contexts. We are called into this ministry together as a communion of churches, called forth into the world as one body, with one Spirit, and one hope.

The LWF embodies a vision of communion, expressed through our commitment to unity in the one body of Christ. LWF member churches are called to bear witness to God’s compassion and mercy for the world. But in a fragmented world where bodies, societies, and ecosystems suffer from injustices of every kind, how does our communion fulfill the church’s ministry of reconciliation?

Baptized into the one body of Christ, as new creation, we are called to engage that profound and all-encompassing reconciliation that God accomplishes in the world. What does this look like in the life of your church? What are the challenges in your context to live as new creation, as people of God? How does being part of a global communion call forth your gifts, while equipping you to participate in your local context?

¹ All Bible quotations in this publication come from the New Revised Standard Version.

In the Large Catechism, Luther writes, “In baptism, therefore, every Christian has enough to study and practice all his or her life.” This *Study Guide* is an invitation for all the baptized to discern our common theme in light of the lived reality of our baptismal vocation and discipline.

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Each section in this study resource starts with introducing one aspect of the theme, beginning with “listening to” two or three “cries” that emerge from contemporary challenges to one body, one Spirit, and one hope. Secondly, the section offers a theological perspective to help interpret the theme of “seeing with new eyes.” Thirdly, each section provides examples of blessings, gifts, and promise that nurture the hope within us in a spirit of “thanksgiving.” Finally, each chapter concludes with a set of questions to help us to faithfully reflect on “what is this?” that lies at the heart of the theme.

While examples are as diverse as the communion, the *Study Guide* highlights a few. Others are explored in the *Assembly Reader*. Examples are meant to inspire reflection on your own experience and the practical implications of the theme in your context. While not exhaustive by any means, they reveal a “red thread” of the theme—unity.

“Unity” is clearly identified by the repetition of the word “one:” one Body, one Spirit, one Hope. Therefore, we begin by considering the concept of unity and the inherent connectivity in the theme.

UNITY

Unity underlies all three parts of the Assembly theme. The three components of the theme

² Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, “Concerning Baptism,” in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, The Large Catechism, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 461.

stand in unity with one another. Body, Spirit, and Hope are interconnected. Hope is the experience of God's Spirit that compels us to bridge the gap between the all-encompassing peace and justice God has promised and the reality of the world in which we live. It is the body, filled by God's Spirit that lives into the hope of ever-growing communion and reconciliation.

"Communion" implies a union of diverse things. Lutherans confess a belief in God as Trinity, which describes a relationship of diversity in perfect unity. God is a life-giving communion of three in one. The First Letter of John affirms that the nature of this communion is love (1 Jn 4:14-16). "God is love" and the Trinity is a way of describing the mystery of this relationship of love.

A communion of love has three movements: creating, reconciling and renewing. The Trinity creates the goodness and beauty of a world of diverse beings. Where that community is divided, and beings are excluded from life-giving relationships to one another, God's love reconciles, and the community is renewed.

Communion implies a community of beings with diverse gifts (charismata). In communion, there is a close connection between God's grace (charis) and gifts (charismata). In communion, members demonstrate the grace to recognize, honor and make room for the diverse gifts of all. Diversity is a natural part of God's creative and liberating work. The trinitarian nature of God as a communion of love offers us a way to understand the unity of diverse beings in the world as a gift. Communion is embedded within creation itself as we read in the first chapter of Genesis. The world was created good, in a profound harmony that was then broken by sin, by human beings turning in upon themselves, looking only at their own needs and desires. Human beings broke communion with God and with creation. When we turn in upon ourselves, creation and our fellow human beings are exploited for one's own gain or for the benefit of only one community. Such self-defined communities that are curved in upon themselves demand uniformity.

Uniformity is the opposite of "reconciled diversity." Human beings impose uniformity through the systems they create. When "unity"

is confused with "uniformity" the neighbor is forced to give up their gifts to conform to the dominant group. The human desire for racial, cultural, religious, ecological or political uniformity excludes, oppresses and ultimately destroys. There are many examples of the church "baptizing" the goal of cultural, political or economic uniformity in the name of mission or evangelism. History is full of examples of imperial or colonial interests striving to create uniformity in the name of unity.

Not far from Kraków is the Auschwitz-Birkenau former German Nazi concentration and extermination camp (1940-1945). Auschwitz-Birkenau stands as a stark and constant reminder of the negation of the Assembly theme. It represents the "powers and principalities" that work against God's act of reconciling the world to God's self. Auschwitz-Birkenau represents the oppressive forces that are unleashed when human beings define what the theme "one body, one spirit, one hope," means in terms of an exclusionary ideology which puts nationalistic, ethnic, gender, class or religious identity first at any price. "One-ness" can be the greatest evil when it is human-constructed uniformity.

We are all too aware of the global backdrop of growing social, political, economic and ecological exclusion that result from false narratives of dualism, division, domination, displacement and uniformity. Unjust political, social, economic, religious and spiritual systems dehumanize the dignity of human beings and destroy the life of all God's creation. The COVID-19 pandemic has further unmasked the injustices and economic inequity around the globe. Sin divides and separates human beings within and against themselves. Paul writes in Romans 8 that these present sufferings are heard in groans, sometimes too deep for words.

These groans/cries are presented in the first section of each chapter of this *Assembly Study Guide*. Each chapter—Body, Spirit and Hope—is divided into the following four sections:

Cries: We begin by hearing the groans that are caused by dualism, division and domination

that disintegrate the “unity of the Spirit.” They are presented as the cries of bodies, of the Spirit and for hope. We begin this way in order to honor the loss, pain or grief, and hold it with compassion.

Eyes to see: The presentation of these cries is followed by a biblical and theological framework for deeper reflection on the topics of Body, Spirit and Hope. This framework invites us to hear the cries with new ears, or see with new eyes, situating these realities of the trauma of brokenness in light of the gospel that unites us in one confession as a communion of churches.

Thanksgiving: This section provides examples from life and ministry that highlight blessings of the Body, gifts of the Spirit and the promise of Hope. Gratitude for these blessings, gifts and promise orients us toward our participation in the creative, reconciling and renewing mission of God that has been revealed in Christ Jesus.

What is this? Questions for reflection:

Each chapter ends with a set of questions that aim to help you and your church ask, “What is this?” in your context. This approach comes from the Small Catechism. In the original German of the Small Catechism, Luther wrote: “Was ist das?”—this is a child’s question to parents. These questions are a pedagogical way to help us to faithfully reflect on the contextual, collective and cosmic

promise that lies at the heart of the theme, “One Body, One Spirit, One Hope.” How will member churches, individually and as a global communion of churches, be signs of hope in creation, participating in God’s holistic mission of creating, reconciling and renewing? How are we called, enlightened and equipped to participate in the ministry of reconciliation that has been entrusted to us? How can we help one another make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace?

AN INVITATION

The *Study Guide* closes with an invitation to discern how communion is an instrument through which LWF member churches embody faithful, creative, and reconciled unity through worship (leitourgia), proclamation (kerygma), public witness (martyria) and service (diakonia). The one hope of the church’s ministry is that all may know the liberation God offers in Jesus Christ that leads to the abundance of life and shalom (peace) that God intends for all creation (Jn 10:10). Our fellowship in the Word and sacraments leads us to public witness, prophetic diakonia, humanitarian actions, and advocacy to right injustices and reconcile relationships where we are rooted. The study book highlights some of the pastoral practices and diaconal and humanitarian interventions of the LWF and its member churches in different parts of the world, which ground our common faith in diverse contextual realities.

ONE BODY

The Thirteenth Assembly theme “One Body, One Spirit, One Hope,” reflects the urgency for the church to recognize God’s gift of body and the value and dignity of the many bodies God has created. It also challenges the church to diligently search for truth, reconciliation, and healing of the wounded bodies.

The concept of one body may convey many levels of meaning for this assembly. The fact that God became incarnate in Jesus Christ, gives embodiment a special value in Christianity, calling us to not separate body, spirit, and mind from each other, for then we risk devaluing the body and especially the body of our neighbors (1 Cor 6:19).

Our primary location, through our baptism, is the church, the one body of Christ. Body also indicates our participation in social bodies and economies (and therefore political bodies as well). Body also points to our belonging to the earth as one community of life, rooted in creation.

The apostle Paul uses the concept of body to describe the church (Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 12:12ff, etc.), as the one body of Christ into which people of different races, nationalities and conditions (Jn 3:5) were baptized. In this body, there were no distinctions according to culture, gender or citizenship. The diversity of languages, cultures, skills and talents were understood in terms of grace—gifts of the Spirit at work through the diverse members of the church. Rather than being merely tolerated, diversity was necessary for the health of the body, just as diverse organs are necessary for the physical body. Belonging meant that each person contributed to the body. Equity called for priority to be given to “weaker” members in order to build up the health of the whole.

The Assembly theme affirms the body, both as a place and community of inclusion and participation. Unfortunately, many bodies, both individual and communal, often experience a different reality.

CRIES OF THE BODY

The body of Christ was a site of violence. Rejected, excluded, despised, nailed to the cross, Christ cried out in his suffering. Today, in many parts of the world, the body of Christ, the church, is persecuted. Furthermore, division among Christians continues to crucify the body of Christ. Divisions result in judgment and suffering, exclusion, and violence. The cross as the place of reconciliation, the table as the place of communion are fenced off. Christ cries out.

Whether ecological, social or individual, bodies become the site of violence. War, violence, discrimination and hatred: all aim to hurt, kill, deny the value of body, and therefore the rights, dignity, breath and life itself. Sometimes individual bodies are attacked in order to deface, desecrate and demoralize a larger community. At times, communal hatred is poured out on a symbolic site or a religious place, such as a church, but also a synagogue, mosque, temple. Sometimes political or economic forces target lands that are sacred to a particular community. For example, burial or sacred forests, or places that contain the stories of Indigenous people around the world are often annexed and occupied by governments who claim imminent domain to build settlements, walls, borders or mining resources. In such sites of violence, Christ cries out.

And so, we consider the cries of many bodies: the cries of individuals who know discrimination because of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or class; the cries of the human family ravaged by the COVID-19 pandemic and many other serious diseases; the cries of communities marginalized and exploited; and the cries of all creation.

RACE, ETHNICITY, GENDER

If human beings view one another through the lens of our primary identity, as creatures with inherent dignity that comes from bearing the image of the Creator, it is impossible to justify the abuse, violation, discrimination or exclusion of anybody. However, history is rife with narratives that classify and marginalize people based on ethnicity, race, class or gender. We hear the cries of discriminated bodies who are imprisoned in humanly devised social and economic hierarchies. The impact of these hierarchies is felt in the lack of personal and political agency, and even in the loss of lives and livelihoods.

There is no part of the world that has been untouched by systemic discrimination because of race and political ideology, which was greatly exacerbated by colonialism. Next to Africa and the Americas, Asia suffered under colonialism, becoming in many instances a place for proxy wars and armed conflicts, forcing people to flee their homelands. As the LWF Assembly meets in Central Eastern Europe, it is important to remember that those living here have often been oppressed throughout their history by different imperial powers.

Racism and segregation are still alive all over the world, taking different forms in prejudice, discrimination, and violence. The Black Lives Matter movement, which began in the United States of America, has contextualized, and catalyzed the cries of those around the world who have suffered and are still suffering as the results of systemic racism and violence for generations. The political and economic alliance of the trans-Atlantic slave trade³, the plantation system, the caste system, and global capitalism are all expressions of systemic sin, disbelief in God and reliance only on one's individual or collective self-interest. False narratives of dualism and domination led colonialists in the Caribbean and North America to use displacement, division, and demand for cultural uniformity to sustain the political economy that created the system which subsequently financed and fueled our

current global economy and systemic and internalized effects of racism that persist today.

In Central Eastern Europe, the word “slavery” evokes associations with the experience of two totalitarian regimes that marked the history of the region in the 20th century. Soviet Russia developed a system of forced labor camps (Gulag). Nazi Germany also used forced labor as a tool for total warfare and established “death camps,” in which millions of people perished, predominantly Jews. Nazism aimed at creating a national body where those who did not “fit” were literally eliminated from the body.

Today, we see spirits of exclusion, hatred, and oppression resurfacing. They continue to torment our spirits and grieve the Holy Spirit of God (Eph 4:30). The killing of George Floyd and others in the United States has come to symbolize a global movement and what the media has dubbed a “Racial Reckoning,” a long overdue conversation about on-going racial injustice. Floyd’s last cry “I can’t breathe” echoed existing legislative and social orders in many other countries, that quite literally, choke the life out of many bodies.” The underlying inequalities and inequities of colonialism and systemic discrimination have myriad effects that are related to health care, education, housing, criminal justice, land rights or sovereignty, and political enfranchisement that persist across societies today. Exclusionary narratives continue to divide humanity and justify the domination of some bodies over the others. In all situations, where self-justification and judgment dictate the narrative, persons are further marginalized, excluded, even eliminated. And Christ himself cries out.

Fundamentalist interpretations of the Bible, coercive theological teachings, ecclesial practices, cultures, and women’s rights in society are of particular concern. Women’s oppression is often justified by the surrounding culture and norms. The Gospel of Jesus Christ—liberated by grace—questions cultural norms that are contradictory to it. Yet, far too often theologies are spread that limit women’s activities to the domestic sphere only. Often

³ Trans-Atlantic Slave Voyages. Accessed 25 April 2022 (slavevoyages.org/about/about#history/1/en).

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reference is made to the order of creation. Yet when God spoke about creating a “helper” to man (Gen 2:18), God did not mean that the woman should be subordinate and submissive. On the contrary, the word ‘ezer’ that is used in Genesis 2 and altogether in the Old Testament almost 20 times for “helper,” mainly refers to assistance that one offers in terms of strength to the one in need (God helping God’s people, a king offering help to his people, etc.).

We hear the cries of all women who are excluded from full and meaningful participation in political and public life. They are denied equal access to education and countless more suffer from discriminatory hiring and employment practices. Women cannot access health care and family planning, nor economic and social benefits, or equality before the law. They suffer sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) at home, at work, in public spaces, and in our houses of worship. These cries rise not only from public and cultural settings, but also within our congregations and households of

faith. We hear the cries of those who, because of their gender, are denied possibilities to contribute with their God-given gifts and God-given calling to the life of the church.

In many parts of the world, legal systems oppress people and endanger people whose gender identities do not fit a classic distinction. In our communion, where churches live and witness in very different contexts and under a large variety of legislations, opinions about blessing same-sex couples differ considerably. However, we know that every human being has a God-given dignity. The church should call for respect toward this dignity and not be among those who exercise violence whether in words or deeds.

DISPLACEMENT

In its *World Migration Report 2022*, the United Nations (UN) International Organization for Migration stated “that there were around 281

But millions of people are forced to leave their homes to seek refuge or asylum from conflict, violence or human rights abuses against their family or people group. Many are forced to migrate due to the ecological or economic loss of livelihoods and work. Still, others are forced from their homes due to unjust land seizure, imprisonment, or human trafficking.

million international migrants in the world in 2020.”⁴ There are many reasons why people migrate from one geographical area to another. Many choose to migrate for work, to reunite with families or to seek new opportunities motivated by a yearning for a better life. But millions of people are forced to leave their homes to seek refuge or asylum from conflict, violence or human rights abuses against their family or people group. Many are forced to migrate due to the ecological or economic loss of livelihoods and work. Still, others are forced from their homes due to unjust land seizure, imprisonment, or human trafficking. Forced migration often takes place in the shadows where those compelled to flee are victimized in ways that leave physical, spiritual, and psychological trauma that can last for generations. The trauma of forced displacement and irregular migration involves a difficult journey that affects both body and mind.

Today, we hear the cries of communities who are still occupied or policed, who cannot live into the fullness of life. We hear the cries of those who are dislocated and exiled from their homelands, those separated from their neighbors by walls and laws according to political policies, race, religion, or class. We also hear the cries and yearning of the human spirit reaching out to God, recognized or unrecognized. We hear the cries of people who have lost work and livelihood and are broken in spirit. And we hear the cries of youth who no longer find meaning in the structures of society, its economy, and politics.

Often these cries are heard as groans too deep for words, because people have been uprooted and cut off or separated from their cultural and spiritual ways of meaning-making. Forced migration or removal often cuts off people from the very communities that help them put words

⁴ UN International Organization for Migration, *World Migration Report 2022* (1 December 2021). Accessed 31 January 2023 (publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2022).

to their experience. Like the Israelites who wept by the rivers of Babylon wondering how they could sing their song in a strange land (Ps 137), refugees, displaced persons, Indigenous people, and those who are occupied must struggle to keep their memories, languages, and spirituality alive while they are on the move and separated from the places they call home.

COVID-19

Since 2019, the world has witnessed dire situations of brokenness, pain, disease, and death due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Physical isolation, health and life. While the new coronavirus disease impacted the whole world, its effects were not felt evenly across economic and social boundaries. An example is the existing injustice of caste systems such as those experienced by Dalit and Adivasi people across Asia. Rev. Joshuva Peter, executive secretary of the United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India (UELCI) said that the global health crisis “is exposing once again India’s deep economic divide with the country’s poorest people being hardest hit by restrictions aimed at curbing the spread of infection.”⁵

Unfortunately, this disparity was not unique to India. The inequity and inequality of access to health care, economic relief and social support revealed what came to be known as “shadow pandemics.” Shadow pandemic refers to the growing rate of violence against women and girls. Indeed, pre-existing injustices such as SGBV rose by 40 percent, according to the 2020 statistics of the United Nations agency for women, UN Women.

COVID-19 has impacted parishes around the world, preventing believers from gathering, worshiping in-person, and, in many places, causing great economic stress and threatening livelihoods. The challenge is an on-going one for LWF member churches as they seek to respond to new conditions for worship and community life. The decisions that are taken today about how the members of the body of Christ worship will shape local communities

for many years. The pandemic requires LWF member churches to seriously reflect on liturgical practices and community presence.

We hear the cries of the over 6 million people who have died from COVID-19. The cries of millions who had to suffer in isolation, who lost their jobs and income. The cries of families and friends who had to bury their loved ones without the support of faith communities and rituals. We hear the cries of health care workers who toiled unceasingly and compassionately. We hear the cries of faith communities attempting to find new ways to gather.

THE EARTH

We hear the cries of another body: the earth, God’s creation. Those cries are increasing with each passing year. Recent droughts, floods, rising sea waters, wildfires and unprecedented heat and cold waves are signs of climate change that is no longer part of a regular scenario. The emission of greenhouse gases from the burning of fossil fuels continues to increase air clogging. The ubiquity of single-use plastics continues to proliferate, suffocating our waters and all its inhabitants from small fish to large whales. Rather than fulfilling our human obligation to till and keep the garden, our human ways of life have begun to “unmake” the ecological relationships between the earth and all creatures.

The Book of Genesis speaks of the earth’s life-giving agency to produce living creatures of every kind (Gen 1:24). But today, we demand ever more of our planet’s energy, while the earth struggles to heal and sustain itself. Our consumption outpaces the earth’s capacity for production.

Scripture knows that all creation communicates to those who have ears to hear:

“But ask the animals, and they will teach you, the birds of the air, and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you, and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know

⁵ The Lutheran World Federation, “COVID-19: Indian Churches stand with poorest communities,” 20 April 2020. Accessed 8 March 2023 (lutheranworld.org/news/covid-19-indian-churches-stand-poorest-communities).

For Lutherans, the theology of the cross is an important concept for interpreting the lived experience of suffering in the world. This includes both natural suffering such as disease, predation, natural disasters and death, and suffering that comes at the hands of human-caused injustices, including the effects of anthropogenic climate change.

that the hand of the Lord has done this?
In his hand is the life of every living thing
and the breath of every human being.
(Job 12:7-10)

Today, creation cries out not only with praise of God, but in suffering, as Paul writes in his letter to the Romans. Creation has been “subjected to futility, not by its own choice, but by the will of [humans] who subjected it” (Rom 8:20).

We hear silence from barren or lost habitats. The noise of heavy machinery removing mountaintops and forests to mine deep into the earth. The gasps of fish struggling to breathe among bleached coral reefs and ocean depths that are losing their capacity to contain oxygen. The crackling of lands desiccated by drought. And, the cries of animals fleeing fires, deforestation and ever-shrinking wild spaces to seek shelter, food, a new place to lay their young ones and find freedom of movement.

EYES TO SEE

Article II of the Augsburg Confession (CA) states that original sin is the inability to fear and trust God. Our inability nails Christ to the cross over and over again. The root of all systems of oppression, division and exclusion lies in a fundamental refusal to see, trust and respect the image of God in a fellow being, whose body is different. When human bodies are classified according to caste, skin color, religion, culture, ethnicity or gender they can be dismissed, even dismembered for non-compliance to a dominant idea of “normal.” And then human beings no longer see themselves as siblings who are created in God’s image, as God intended.

Divisions inflict violence on many human bodies which continue to groan, struggle, waiting for change, vindication and resurrection. They live in hope of new life. Article II of the CA also states that being born anew in baptism opens the doors to trust. Baptism calls us to a deep respect of human

beings and their bodies, including those who are different from ourselves, for in them and their bodies we see God. The church as the body of Christ is itself called to live into that profound unity that God has given to humanity. This challenge is also our hope. Paul assures us, all things wait “in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its enslavement to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8:21). Through the church, God calls all peoples and creation into community.

Individuals and faith communities, households and social bodies, political structures and ecosystems are all embedded in creation, part of the body of the whole inhabited earth (oikoumene). The Letter to the Colossians sings that the whole cosmos is one body, created and sustained by the Trinity.

For in [Christ] all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through [Christ] and for him. [Christ] himself is before all things, and in [Christ] all things hold together (Col 1:16-17).

The way that we live and relate to one another on this earth, our common dwelling place (oikos), is held together in communion (koinonia) by many layers of relationships, including economy (oikonomia) and ecology (oikologia). There are political, social, biological and physical realities to all our relationships. But Colossians reminds us of the spiritual reality, which holds connected the often-ambiguous relationships between peoples and the planet.

In his work, *Jesus, the Crucified People*, Choan-Seng Song⁶ from Taiwan states: God identifies Godself in Jesus and his pain not only with the suffering of the people. Jesus’ pain is identical with the pain of the people “crucified” by acts of violence. Jesus is one with the suffering people. The pain of the crucified people of Asia, or anywhere in the world, is therefore the embodiment of Jesus.

⁶ Choan-Seng Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996).

⁷ Luther, M. *Luther’s Works, Vol. 31: Career of the Reformer I*. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds. Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1991), 40.

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In his Heidelberg Disputation in 1518, Martin Luther wrote:

19. [A] person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened [Rom. 1.20].

20. The one who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross, deserves to be called a theologian.

21. A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.⁷

The cross reveals a promise that helps us to see God’s loving presence in the midst of the human experience. For, “the Word became flesh and lived among us” (Jn 1:14). However, today, many misleading theologies interpret bodily suffering as a spiritual proof of God’s judgement or absence or even as an opportunity to test our faith. A theology of the cross states things as they are: the injustice and bodily suffering of Jesus were not a test of faithfulness. Underneath Jesus’ lament from the cross, the opposite is revealed (sub contrario). Jesus cried out with the feeling of being separated and alone, but that cry reveals the unfailing unity of the Trinity. At the point of the greatest division and separation, they remained bound together in the unity of the Spirit.

The real suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus reveal that our bodies cannot be separated from the love of the Triune God in Christ Jesus. As

the Letter to the Colossians affirms, “in [Christ] all things hold together” (Col 1:17).

In the suffering and cries incarnate in the bodies of creatures and all creation, the Spirit holds us in that mystery of God’s gracious, creative, reconciling and renewing presence by interceding in groans too deep for words. That reality of life-giving “power-with” is hidden behind the masks of the unjust suffering and cries that we hear and see. Where bodies suffer the divisions and exclusions of powers and principalities, life and love are present. That promise of the sure and certain hope communicates the eternal possibility for new acts of creation, reconciliation and renewal. That possibility is realized where the promise is fully and unambiguously proclaimed in Word and sacrament.

The theology of the cross points us to the revelation of God’s promise and guards us from seeking any deeper or hidden spiritual or theological meaning of suffering. The spiritualization of suffering has often perpetuated sacrifice. Women and enslaved people are all too often told that carrying and enduring the burden of racial, ethnic, sexual or gender-based violence is a Christian virtue. Injustices caused by humans are thereby legitimized as pathways for the vulnerable to experience spiritual suffering, supposedly in imitation of Christ. However, God’s deep identification with suffering people in Christ Jesus liberates us with the truth. God’s incarnation, suffering and death in Jesus unmasks the violence, injustice and brokenness that cause unjust suffering and frees us from self-sacrifice.

Paul uses the image of the body to reverse a hierarchical logic, which had classified female bodies as “weaker” than male bodies. His appeal to give priority to the “weaker” members unmasks how unjust it is to value any one of God’s creatures according to a definition of strength or power (1 Cor 12:12-27 / Gal 3:26-28). A theology of the cross contradicts the logic of nations and financial markets which classify contributions as “weaker” or “stronger” according to physical, political, or economic strength. Jesus revealed that power is perfected in “weakness.”

The image of the body of Christ affirms that true “power” emerges from the way each member belongs to the body. In this body, members are not valued for the perceived “strength” of their diverse contribution. Rather, the diverse gifts of each member are appreciated because, as beloved creatures who belong, their gifts build up the community, the communion.

Being set free from all powers and principalities of this world, the church as the body of Christ is called to be a servant. The church serves God’s mission of reconciling all things with God, and thereby reconciling human beings with one another and with creation. Its calling is to live and witness to this unity in reconciled diversity. And God’s mission is not limited but reaches out to all bodies and all creation as expressions of God’s ongoing, creative presence.

Diversity is the wisdom of God woven into the fabric of creation, bearing witness to the life-giving nature of the Trinity as a community. Our communion is called to participate in God’s mission to care for creation, for bodies, and for the one Body which we all are, ensuring all creatures have a home to flourish and participate in the Spirit’s work of renewing the face of the earth.

The presence of the church as a body of people assembled in the world united across ethnic, national, economic, race and gender-based differences is a radical critique of political, social and economic systems that seek to enforce cohesion through uniformity. Many churches, witnessing in diverse contexts bear witness to the hope that is found in the life-giving liberty of being a communion. The church, as a body of faith communities in diverse contexts, transcends denominations and the borders of time and space. The LWF communion of churches, itself an ecclesial body in the world, can bear witness to hope, holding up the gospel to reform unjust power structures and reconcile divisions. A communion of churches is a body in the world that can hold up the mirror of the gospel to reform unjust power structures.

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THANKSGIVING: BLESSINGS OF BODIES

In a world where political and economic narratives attempt to gain influence by dividing bodies from Spirit and bodies from one another, Christian theology affirms the centrality of the body, and cannot be thought of outside of the contexts of bodies. The church itself is described as a body. Lutheran sacramental theology is incarnation. Though the Lutheran confessional tradition maintains a clear understanding of sin and the brokenness of our individual and collective bodies, Lutheran theology also affirms the dignity, value, beauty and goodness of every individual and collective body as the Creator’s creation. Bodies are the sites of blessings, though all too often in this world, the objects of both injustice and the location of suffering.

Paul writes: “Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God” (1 Cor 6:19). Bodies are the meeting place of mind, spirit and matter—the place where the Holy Spirit bears fruit. While we all share in that same Spirit, the diversity of bodies accounts for the diversity of fruit that we see in the world. Bodies of every ability, ethnicity, shape, race and gender are endowed with the creative image of God that brings forth gifts.

The whole person is the location of perception and learning and the vessel of creativity, imagination, art, technology. The human body is the site of compassion and care. Bodies share the gift and trust of sexuality that both create life and express love. The whole person—not just as mind but also as body—is the node for forming, reforming and transforming familial, social, political and ecological relationships. As one, body, mind, spirit, human beings are capable of bearing and communicating the infinite love of God.

Lutheran theology offers an insightful approach to the ancient and modern philosophical question about the relationship between mind, bodies and spirits, and that between the Spirit of God and the physical reality of all creation. Martin Luther acknowledged the sheer freedom of God and experienced the presence of God in the world. In an Advent Sermon he wrote, “For God has written this article of the last day and resurrection of the dead not only in books, but also in trees and other creatures.”⁸

Luther’s firm belief that creation subsisted in the Spirit, and that bodies were composed of matter and spirit, led him to maintain a strong belief in the possibility of demons, or evil also inhabiting bodies. Luther knew that the Trinity is present behind the “masks of God” (*larvae Dei*), which include all created bodies. But reason and our experience of the world can be ambiguous. Predation, disease, accidents, violence and injustice are everywhere. They can be easily used by misleading theologies, causing people to lose their way. Luther says, if we go out into the world looking for God, we might trip over a stone, burn ourselves in the fire, or drown in the river groping for God. In order not to go astray, we need to keep our eyes focused on Christ. Only Christ can give us a right perspective. Our eyes, however, can too easily focus on what we believe to be evil either as evil or, in self-delusion, as actually good. We have then lost our way.⁹

In order to safeguard us from anxiety and the temptation to turn toward a “theology of glory,” Luther affirmed that the only place where we can be sure of an unveiled revelation of our relationship to God (*coram Deo*) are those things that proclaim the revelation of Christ as gift and promise, that is, in the Word and sacraments. Physical bodies are vessels of God’s Spirit. To say otherwise would be to deny the real presence of Christ in the sacraments and to deny the incarnation of Jesus.

By the incarnate life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God engaged with us in terms we could understand. A body can be seen, heard, touched and smelled. In the sacraments, God continues to “deal with us” through the spoken word of the gospel and “through material signs, that is, baptism and the sacrament of the altar.” Luther writes that while God deals with us inwardly by the Holy Spirit, through faith and gifts, the outward experience of word and sacraments precede the inward experience.¹⁰ Luther is pro-body. God’s revelation is mediated through the physical hearing of the word proclaimed in scripture, preaching, and singing, the smelling, feeling and tasting of bread, wine and water, and seeing the body assembled, reconciled or re-membered in public space.

The act of remembering, retelling our stories and life-stories are important for a theology of the body, and our communion’s capacity to embody justice for individual and collective bodies. In a global communion, we have a trans-contextual platform to tell our stories in a way that resists the dangers of a single narrative or story, whose history, memory or experience can too easily become a domineering force.

Remembering is also a crucial part of the Eucharist. In Holy Communion, Christ, having taken on a human body, gifts himself for all humankind and creation. We remember this gift in the meal offered recalling the night in which Christ’s body became the location of betrayal, torture and death. Of course, the mystery of this profession of faith is that Christ’s body as blessing and gift becomes the location for the cosmic reconciliation that is the salvation of all that is seen and unseen.

In Holy Communion, this “remembering” is not a simple memory, such as a mental image of an experience we had years ago. Rather, it is a remembering of the body in our time. Holy Communion re-members the body of Christ by bringing and proclaiming the promise that where the church gathers, God meets us in the sharing

⁸ Luther, M. *Sermons on the Gospels for the Sundays and Principal Festivals of the Church Year*, Second Sunday in Advent.

⁹ *Weimarer Ausgabe (WA), Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe [Schriften]*. Vol. 19 (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883-2009), 492. *Luther’s Works (LW), American Edition*, Vols. 31–55, Helmut Lehmann (ed.) (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86), 342..

¹⁰ *Ibid.* WA 19, 492, 5; LW 36: 342.

of a meal: bread and wine. Through this, Holy Communion is not just a remembering, but an actualization of God's reality for us, members of Christ's body. Through participation in the body of Christ in Holy Communion, the ecclesial body of Christ is made real and Christ is truly present among us.

Many social, political, and economic forces threaten to dismember bodies or make them disappear. The act of communal worship, the Word proclaimed and the sharing of this holy meal re-members and reconciles bodies in time and space as blessings of creation. Christ's body itself is re-membered in time and space. In worship, we receive the gift of faith that is Christ present in us.

From this experience of reconciliation and communion, the gift of God's love continues to bear the fruits of love in us. The good news liberates and compels us to become "little

Christs" to one another, proclaiming this good news, and serving all creation with a sense of justice for all the broken or dismembered bodies whose cries still ring in our minds and in our communities. Against a backdrop of exclusionary forces that seek to negate bodies and disintegrate reconciled diversity within, ecclesial and political bodies and ecosystems, the LWF communion is called into its identity as a communion that participates in God's mission to create, reconcile, and renew.

The LWF has always understood the gospel in terms of service. There are many encouraging stories in the life of our communion that illustrate how broken relationships are being healed and broken bodies are given new hope. Today, LWF's ministries continue to compassionately serve the bodies of displaced, marginalized and excluded people around the world.



EXAMPLES: COMMUNITIES OF INCLUSION

There are different ways in which the LWF and its member churches are working against the tendencies for exclusion. Below are some examples of this work.

The Assembly theme affirms the body as a site of inclusion and participation and as blessing, the locus of new life. Our hope for new life necessarily involves our created bodies. A Trinitarian theology of life, love, justice, and salvation is inconceivable without reference to the body. God created bodies and saw that they were good. God comes to us as a body, in Christ Jesus. Our hope, founded on the promise of new life is rooted in the resurrection of Christ, in the communion of saints, and in the resurrection of the body professed in the ecumenical creeds.

The LWF is committed to deepening theological reflection that articulates our understanding of being Lutheran churches in communion. In 2022, the 500th anniversary of Luther's translation of the New Testament presented opportunities to dig deeper into the diverse ways in which Lutherans read and engage with the Word of God in their lives. During the "Bible Year," LWF hosted several activities including a webinar series featuring biblical scholars from around the world. Speaking at one of the webinars, Rev. Dr Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, visiting professor at the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg, France, said that much like Luther in his day, the challenge for Christians today is "to strike a balance between scripture alone and the need to bring skills and gifts, the whole conversation of the church to it and to guard against abuses of it." Through our shared work in theological reflection, LWF continues to develop an understanding of the theological identity of LWF member churches through

which they include and recognize each other as belonging to the communion, while witnessing in diverse contexts.

Serving the needy has been a pillar of the work of the LWF since its foundation. This service is carried out locally and globally, by member churches and LWF World Service, the communion's humanitarian and diaconal arm.

The compass of LWF's diaconal work points toward transformation, reconciliation and empowerment. Our engagement with the churches includes initiatives to alleviate suffering during crisis and long-term activities to build the resilience of churches themselves and the wider community. Diaconal work in member churches and member church projects on food production and land management, provision of health and education services, and care for the environment, are only a few examples of this commitment. Diakonia goes far beyond alleviating everyday needs, it is also about shaping communities and the art and practice of living together. The European Diaconal Process, initiated by the LWF, has since 2011 explored the experiences of individual churches, diaconal institutions and individuals in serving people. Through this it has been possible to develop practical models for living together (conviviality) in the face of increasingly diverse communities across the region. The concepts of vocation, justice and dignity that are at the core of the conviviality approach have been presented in several LWF publications showing how churches have transformed their approach to diakonia and extended hospitality to many excluded people such as refugees and migrants.¹¹

¹¹ Tony Addy, International Academy for Diaconia and Social Action [interdiac] (Eds.), *The Lutheran World Federation in Conviviality and the Diaconal Church, Conviviality with People on the Move, Convivial Church and Radical Welcome*, (Bielsko-Biała: Ośrodek Wydawniczy Augustana, 2021). Accessed 31 January 2023 (www.lutheranworld.org/resources/publication-conviviality-stories-diaconal-life-diversity-lwfs-european-regions-book-4).

The active presence of LWF's international humanitarian and development arm World Service in over 20 countries around the world embraces a community-based approach.

We cooperate locally with our member churches, local organizations, and local governments who have in-depth knowledge of local communities, in order to best serve the needs of refugees, displaced, returnees and other vulnerable people. An example is the multi-religious and multi-cultural context in Nepal, where the LWF member church and country program have been complementing each other's expertise to ensure marginalized groups can live in dignity, uphold respect for human rights and improve the capacity to establish sustainable livelihoods. Another example is Chad, where LWF has been supporting refugees from Central African Republic, Nigeria and Sudan, as well as the internally displaced, returnees, and host communities since 2007. Initiatives like the "Seeds for Solutions" and other livelihood projects seek to improve self-reliance in refugee and local populations while promoting peaceful coexistence and social cohesion between different groups.

Refugees, internally displaced and other vulnerable groups comprise half of the 3–4 million people worldwide whom the LWF serves in its country programs in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean and Europe. Most of them have been forced to flee their homes due to protracted conflict and war, and climate induced displacements. The international and local diaconal collaboration was particularly important in the 2022 response to the war in Ukraine whereby the LWF adopted a holistic response by setting up an emergency program for Ukrainian refugees in Warsaw, Poland and in Kiev, Ukraine. The assistance includes emergency food and non-food items, multipurpose cash assistance, mental health and psycho-social support and education. It is also extended through the member churches

in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovak Republic, Romania and Ukraine itself.

Health care provision including full-fledged hospitals, centers that provide counseling and rehabilitation, and facilities for people living with disabilities

are some of LWF's core work of restoring wellbeing to bodies. In the Holy Land, the LWF-owned and operated Augusta Victoria Hospital (AVH) in East Jerusalem is the only medical facility in the West Bank offering specialized treatment for cancer and pediatric kidney dialysis to patients in the Palestinian territories. On a daily basis, these and other specialty services touch and heal countless bodies, both young and old, from communities across the West Bank and Gaza who are otherwise vulnerable and marginalized.

To be Lutheran is to be ecumenical.

LWF affirmed its commitment to working for Christian unity with the publication of its six commitments on "the ecumenical way to ecclesial communion." They express a need to work for unity locally and globally, through a holistic approach to ecumenism, which includes theological dialogues, diaconal witness, advocacy, and shared spiritual life.¹² Drawn by a common urgency to present the message of God's liberating grace and hope for this world, the five world communions (Anglican, Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, and Reformed), signatories of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (JDDJ) recognize a challenge for them to witness to God's liberating grace in ways which provoke and convey the hope and grace of the gospel. The world urgently needs to encounter the message of God's liberating grace. In a time of individualism and commodification, these world communions want to stand together to offer the message of gospel freedom.

"Welcoming the Stranger, Shaping the Future, Living as Neighbors" is a joint

¹² *The Lutheran World Federation, Commitments on the Ecumenical Way to Ecclesial Communion* (Geneva: LWF 2018). Accessed 31 January 2023 (lutheranworld.org/resources/publication-lutheran-world-federations-commitments-ecumenical-way-ecclesial-communion).

interfaith initiative by LWF, Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW), and HIAS—a Jewish Humanitarian organization. Inspired by our respective faiths and theological underpinnings, as well as a commitment to serve refugees around the world, all three organizations came together to accompany and support national and local faith actors in refugee response and promoting social cohesion in their respective societies. On World Refugee Day 2022, the interfaith collaboration crossed an important milestone with an international conference in Geneva gathering 50 faith actors at local and national levels in Europe, Asia and Latin America, as well as other participants from HIAS, LWF, IRW and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

The LWF promotes leadership models that are grounded in the concept of the priesthood of all believers. Following the example of Jesus, the primary task of those in church leadership is to serve and to guide. Leaders guide and equip their community for life in the respective local settings. Lutheran churches strive to realize the full and meaningful participation of lay people and youth at all levels of community life and decision making. LWF accompanies people in church leadership positions by offering spaces where they can be connected and deepen their understanding and self-awareness as leaders in the Lutheran communion. The annual lay leaders' seminars and the Retreat of Newly-Elected Leaders connect church leaders from across communion. In order to deepen unity, leaders from LWF member churches are challenged to critically explore how our shared values—dignity and justice, compassion and commitment, respect for diversity, inclusion and participation, transparency and accountability—apply in church leadership.

The LWF continues to honor the inherent dignity of women and their vocations through its Gender Justice and Women's Empowerment work. Through national and regional networks among the member churches LWF supports efforts to build just communities of men and women including promoting the ordination of women and their

meaningful participation at all levels of the church. Every LWF assembly since 1984 has affirmed the communion's commitment to the full inclusion of women in the ordained ministry. Over the past decade, the annual Women's Human Rights Training, organized in collaboration with our ecumenical partners and targeted at gender justice advocates in our churches and country programs, has become an important platform for building capacity and skills to raise further awareness and influence policy at global, regional and local levels. The continuous affirmation of women's ordination over the years has significantly contributed to the growing number of churches around the world that accept women into the full ministry of word and sacrament and leadership positions in the church and its institutions. More than 90 percent of LWF's member churches now ordain women and more women are assuming national and diocesan leadership positions in the church.

By convening spaces for theological reflection, liturgical engagement and building capacity for climate action, the LWF affirms humanity's belonging to the one body of God's creation, and the human vocation to tend and keep the conditions that sustain life. Through its annual leadership and participation in the ecumenical Season of Creation (SoC) and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and its Conference of the Parties (COP), LWF equips churches to participate in prayer, action, and advocacy for creation and climate justice. Youth from member churches lead LWF's delegation to the COP with many of them using the knowledge and skills gained to lead climate justice projects for adaptation, mitigation, advocacy and education in their home churches and communities. As a communion of churches, we also address the spiritual and theological dimensions of the climate crisis with youth. A partnership with Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, the ELCA and Lutherans Restoring Creation, offers a Certificate in Climate Justice and Faith that gathers learners from the seven LWF regions. The aim is to foster an eco-theological worldview, and the practical tools to lead climate justice projects in their local parishes and communities. There

are also many local initiatives in LWF member churches, aiming at the care for creation. An example is the Evangelical Church of the River Plate (IERP) “Crece Selva Misionera” reforestation program in Argentina. Church and community members have planted 180,000 trees as part of their goal of over 280,000 in the country’s northeastern province of Misiones, in order to improve water basins and mitigate the effects of climate change. By accompanying small-scale producers, at least 300 hectares of forest will be recovered, thus filtering rainwater run-off, maintaining stream flows for conservation, improving connectivity of forest areas and carbon storage.

Can the presence of a diverse communion, united in one body, be a sign that calls communities around the globe to discover the liberating, reconciling, and transformational

power for healing that is found in authentic community?

LWF member churches are called to communicate the good news of radical inclusion through proclamation of the Word and celebration of sacraments. While our Lutheran confessional identity is formed and informed by these means of grace and shared commitments, it also recognizes that the Word creates a diversity of faithful identities, all called, gathered and enlightened by the Spirit to live out faith in diverse contexts in the church and in the public sphere. The Spirit continues to blow where it will, creating and enlivening wounded and broken bodies and communities with the perpetual flow of the breath of life that fills every creature that walks, crawls, flies, and swims, and that renews the face of the earth.



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

As Luther asks in the Small Catechism we ask: What is this?

What are some threats to the well-being of ecclesial, social, political and ecological bodies and to diversity, beauty and health, in your context?

What bodies need protection and dignity in your nation or local communities, and how are churches called to create safe spaces for these bodies?

How is your church responding to these cries?

In what ways can the LWF, as a global communion of churches support your faithful work of being a life-giving community in your context?

How can the presence of a diverse communion, united in one body, be a sign that calls communities around the globe to discover the liberating, reconciling, and transformational power for healing that is found in authentic community?



ONE SPIRIT

As noted in the previous chapter, Martin Luther had a strong belief in the ways various spirits can possess a person and a community and keep them in bondage.

Discerning the gifts of the Spirit in persons and communities that build up the body of Christ is therefore a critical and life-giving task. Only Christ, known in the proclamation of Word and sacrament, can liberate. This is the work of the Holy Spirit (CA, Article V).

Discerning the one Spirit from the many spirits of our time is a continual discipline into which the believers are called through their baptism. The spirits of our time seek to divide and hold captive. They contradict the work of reconciliation and renewal that is God's continual creative activity in the world and in all creation. Not only communities suffer when they are turned in upon themselves, but many individuals suffer spiritually when the spirits of our time lift up models contrary to the gospel, such as a spirit of success or contorted standards of beauty and sexuality.

CRIES OF THE SPIRIT

In the Letter to the Romans, Paul writes that in our weakness God's "Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words (Rom 8:26)." These groans of the Spirit deep within each of us often resonate into clear and acute cries of those whose spirits are broken by the spirits of our time that stifle the creative, reconciling, and renewing work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

God's vision is the renewal of the whole earth, all of creation. The Christian tradition is deeply incarnational and rooted in the confession of a God who creates, loves the world to the extent of becoming flesh, offering healing for the

whole heart (body and soul), and resurrecting in the flesh. Yet, one of the persistent perspectives of modern, western worldviews is the separation or duality between the body and spirit. Many theologies divide spirit from bodies and promote a dualism that places body and spirit in conflict. These theologies often speak of the spiritual realm as if it is separate from our bodies in time and space. They have the devastating effect of spiritualizing human suffering as a form of virtue rather than a call for compassion, solidarity, justice or liberation. Dividing spirit and body, dividing the Spirit from creation, strips away the full dignity of human beings and creation and give rise to many cries.

We will focus on the cries of those whose spirits groan as misleading theologies, exclusionary narratives, and worldviews that lead to the growth of one at the expense of another. We will not forget all those whose spirits suffer because they cannot find meaning and hope in their lives or are isolated by growing individualism and a predominant culture of promoting success.

MISLEADING THEOLOGIES

Misleading theologies are taking deeper root in our churches and our social narratives. Transformative theological reflection invites a broad range of contextual, critical, concrete and creative ways of thinking about God's work in the world and building up community. However, some ways of thinking about God, the cosmos, and our place in it can be contradictory to the core of the gospel. Discerning the difference between diverse Christian theological reflection and misleading theologies is a task of the whole church.

Misleading theologies are those that misrepresent the proper work of the Holy Trinity or violate the dignity of humans and all creation, create, or perpetuate injustices, or misinterpret and abuse powers or authorities.

Abuses of power often rest on false claims of special revelations or interpretations of God's law. These false claims contradict the gospel that was revealed through the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

Misleading theologies will hold people captive within a narrowly defined understanding of themselves and church. To do so they underwrite many abuses of power in the political and social realm. Many religious leaders claim political authority, and many political leaders claim religious authority in their quest to implement moral or legal ideologies that are often exclusionary or regressive in terms of human rights and the social protection of vulnerable people and the earth.

Abuses of power often rest on false claims of special revelations or interpretations of God's law. These false claims contradict the gospel that was revealed through the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Christ. In opposition to the liberating and transformative "theology of the cross," false prophets often promote "theologies of glory" that distort definitions of power and blessing.

Specifically, various forms of what is known as "prosperity gospel" proclaim that material wealth or the ability to ascend social hierarchies reflect God's favor or the quality of one's faith in God. Conversely, poverty or social ills are interpreted as signs of a lack of faith, a separation from God's favor or even a curse. These blasphemous distortions of the gospel have provided the basis of western colonialism, justify participation in exploitative economic and labor systems, and preserve social orders that bind people according to unjust hierarchies of class, gender or race within societies and even within our churches.

We hear the cries of our ancestors enslaved by people who dominated lands and people in the name of God. We hear the cries of those who have been deceived by misleading theologies and exploited by leaders who abuse their ministerial authority to consolidate wealth and power and who commit sexual and gender-based violence and many kinds of spiritual violence. In particular, we hear the cries of

women forced to sacrifice their lives and well-being based on misleading interpretations of Christian sacrifice. We hear the cries of many today who are misled by promises of success and wealth but instead are subjugated to the political and economic interests of a few.

EXPLOITATIVE ECONOMIC MODELS

Today, many suffer from silent yet oppressive values that regulate and define what is considered “success.” Many people experience the absolutizing value of the drive for economic success wealth and a “good life” as if those are the only terms that define life. In turn, people are left frustrated, despairing and bereft of any meaning in life. The “individual success story” escapes them and they judge themselves as failures, their spirits sinking in despair as unemployment and debt increase.

This crisis, which also has spiritual dimensions, was further heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic that left many without employment or destroyed flourishing projects and businesses. The global health crisis isolated people, leaving the vulnerable even more vulnerable, victims of personal, family violence and abusive relationships. It facilitated the increase of both wealth and poverty. Economic inequality has worsened as vulnerable groups, especially low-income people lost work and income. Adequate employment, meaningful and justly compensated work are essential to human flourishing both as individuals and as communities.

Yet, a spirit of greed guides many decisions both in the economic and political realm. As already noted, the divide between the rich and the poor only increases. Greed exploits and imprisons people in hopeless situations where they can barely manage to survive, or they live from paycheck to paycheck. Creation itself is exploited, instrumentalized, and destroyed. This situation of greed is against God’s intent that all have life and have it abundantly.

PATRIARCHY

For Lutherans, humankind, as desired by the Creator, is one, representing wholeness and equality. “So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27). Yet, the world over, including in the church itself, patriarchal patterns continue to oppress and divide the human family, denying women both the right to live with dignity and freedom, and the ability to serve with their God-given gifts. A patriarchal mentality is so often unrecognized, yet it clearly determines and limits social actions, participation (or non-participation) in economic and political processes and diminishes the flourishing of human relationships. These patterns and divisions often result in violence, be it physical, psychological, sexual, spiritual, and even death.

Patriarchal cultures encourage different forms of psychological, physical and sexual violence in the context of communities and households. In many parts of the world, social or family moral codes and assumptions related to specific roles often result in the loss of access to education for women and girls, and exclusion from decisions related to marriage or having children. Stereotyping that portrays women predominantly as mothers and spouses limits opportunities to participate in ecclesial and public life overall, or the exercise of civic and political rights. Many of these issues are addressed in the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Yet, women are persecuted daily. Multiple global crises and backlash against women’s rights worsen disparities. Examples can be found on every continent, in every culture and community. We hear the cries of women subjected to suffering due to oppression, violence and exclusion on the basis of patriarchal attitudes and practices.

POPULISM AND ETHNO-NATIONALISM

One of the most destabilizing and socially divisive spirits of our age is a resurging ethno-nationalism. We live in an increasingly globalized world with economic and political forces that are difficult to identify or recognize. The sociocultural shifts in values and growing complexity, make people turn in on themselves, focusing on individual ethno-national narratives that are then exploited by populist leaders determined to promote a return to the illusionary “good old days.”

Ethno-nationalists often politicize religion or belief as grounds for instituting oppressive or exclusionary forms of legal discrimination. Religion is utilized to achieve worldly ends, which deny its dynamic and set it in stone. Religion becomes static, giving rise to religious fundamentalism that in turn fuels powerful tides of ethno-nationalism around the world. Sometimes this fundamentalism is based on the literal interpretations of sacred texts that generate new forms of laws and hearts of stone. Sometimes this fundamentalism is based on socio-ethical interpretations of religious laws and their direct application through legal or judicial systems. But in every case, exclusionary forms of religious fundamentalism that seek social, religious or ethnic uniformity as a political goal will eventually be in idolatrous opposition to the creative, reconciling and renewing work of God’s Spirit.

Populist politicians and religious leaders often take advantage of people’s fears, concerns and disappointment, be it insecurity about their economic situations, sincere concern about their home countries, or general dissatisfaction with their lives. We read in Scripture that “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” (1 Jn 4: 18). However, politicians and religious leaders who support the course of ethno-nationalism and populism tend to nurture fear that casts out love and a broader sense of community. They have tried to summon people in accordance with certain identity markers, be it nation, class, gender or

certain principles. This work is contrary to that of the Holy Spirit that calls the whole of creation into unity, breaking down all the divisions that ideologues construct.

We hear the cries of those whose spirits suffer because of populist movements that restrict and stifle the creative, reconciling, and renewing Spirit of every nation and people. We hear the cries of those who have been rounded up, oppressed, or segregated because of their religious or ethnic identities. We hear the cries of those who have been misled by false prophets and prosperity gospel, whose lives and livelihoods have been destroyed. We hear the cries, often too deep for words, of those whose constant denial and oppression cannot attain the full dignity, equality, and wholeness of being a human being created in God’s image.

O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering,
you would not be pleased.
(Ps 51: 15-16)

EYES TO SEE

We live in a world of diversity where conflicts arise from the struggle to answer questions such as, who am I, and how do I relate to those who do not share my values and culture? The Assembly theme, “One Body, One Spirit, One Hope” invites us to reflect on the dynamic work of the Holy Spirit that creates, reconciles and renews the life of all creation.

THE SPIRIT CREATES

In the Bible, God’s Spirit is described as the creative wind (Ruach) that hovers over creation, imparting breath that inspires all creatures with life. The Spirit is often referred to as God’s Wisdom, who not only creates the natural diversity that we see in the world but traces the liberties and limits of good and just living. Holy Wisdom sets a feast for all to eat, drink and nurture her gifts to bear fruit in every human being.

Ethno-nationalists often politicize religion or belief as grounds for instituting oppressive or exclusionary forms of legal discrimination. Religion is utilized to achieve worldly ends, which deny its dynamic and set it in stone. Religion becomes static, giving rise to religious fundamentalism that in turn fuels powerful tides of ethno-nationalism around the world.

The Gospel of John affirms the Trinitarian nature of this creative work of the Spirit. The opening verses describe this wisdom or Word as God who existed “In the beginning,” and through whom “all things were made.” The Letter to the Colossians contains an early Christian hymn that sings the Trinitarian nature of this creative work by referring to Christ in a cosmologically creative way, proclaiming that in Christ “all things were created” (Col 1:16).

The Bible tells us that after seeing all that was made, God said it was “very good” (Gen 1:31). Part of the inherent goodness of creation is the breath of life present within every creature. The unity of body and spirit is a fundamental aspect of the dignity that is due to every creature and the Earth. On this basis, Martin Luther affirmed the idea that finite creatures can bear the infinite (*finitum capax infiniti*). He affirmed that hidden behind the masks of creation, God’s Spirit was imminently present; that in, with, and under water, bread and wine, God’s Spirit was fully present in the

sacraments; and that by the Spirit, God was incarnate in the body of Jesus.

Any attempt to separate the holistic unity of body, mind, and spirit threatens the inherent goodness of every human being. The effect of dualisms between body and soul or “nature” and “spirit” have disenchanting God’s good creation and reduced the wondrous mystery of life to a mechanical collection of parts. Separated from the breath of life that unites the cosmos as one living creation, the Earth has been reduced to a collection of “natural resources”; dynamic relational ecosystems are reduced to an “environment” that can be parceled, purchased, mined and managed; living plants and animals are reduced to commodities; children of God are reduced to human resources for economic and political goals, or mere flesh whose mind or soul belongs to another world. Against this concept of dualism stands creation, inspiration and incarnation, opening our eyes to the wonder, mystery and dignity of life.

There is a broad and beautiful diversity of spiritual gifts across the body of Christ, because each of us receives this Spirit in a unique body embedded in a unique family, culture and context. The story of Pentecost is one example of how the one Spirit can nurture a diversity of gifts according to diverse bodies and contexts.

THE SPIRIT RECONCILES

The Spirit came upon Mary to bear Christ, the “firstborn” of the reconciliation of “all creation.” The Word by which God created all things became flesh in Jesus. The Spirit was present in the waters of the Jordan River where Jesus was baptized, identified and sent to reveal the good news of reconciliation of all creation. This good news was revealed in the ways that Jesus crossed social, religious and political walls that divide, to unmask their inherent injustices.

Ultimately, the good news of God’s liberating and life-giving presence was revealed on the cross. In the shadow of the cross, we can see the power of non-violence in the face of systemic or state sanctioned violence. In the shadow of the cross, at the moment of greatest isolation and despair, the Spirit maintained the unity of the Trinity that restores life even in the face of death. On the cross, Jesus breathes the same creative, reconciling and renewing Spirit that continues to be present to us as counselor,

advocate, companion and the source of true relationality that inspires us to continue this ministry of reconciliation.

Paul writes about this ministry of reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5:16-21. In the Letter to the Ephesians, the writer also highlights this dynamic of reconciliation. In fact, salvation itself is defined in terms of reconciliation or, in Lutheran terminology, justification is about reconciliation, about living as a reconciled community, a reconciled humanity, a reconciled world. Therefore, justification is broader than simply a “non-guilty” verdict. It is God’s life-giving intention for the whole cosmos inviting all baptized people to participate in work of reconciliation.

THE SPIRIT RENEWS

The psalmist proclaims that God’s Spirit that created the cosmos continues to renew the face of the Earth. Christ’s ministry of reconciliation

calls us to participate in that renewal and transformation of creation. Article VII of the CA reminds us that this ministry continues wherever the church proclaims the gospel and administers the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion. These are as instruments that the Holy Spirit employs to create faith and bring about renewal. Through these means, God creates new hearts, hearts of flesh as described by Ezekiel (Ezek 36:25-28).

The ministry of the Word proclaims the gospel pointing to the revelation of God's heart in Jesus Christ. True proclamation will always point to Christ crucified, who reveals God's favor and gracious and compassionate presence in, with, and through all creation. In the Large Catechism, Luther writes, "For . . . we could never come to recognize [God's] favor and grace were it not for the Lord Christ, who is the mirror of the Father's heart. . . But neither could we know anything of Christ, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit."¹³

Just as the Trinity was fully present when the Spirit hovered over the waters to create life, the Spirit is fully present where the Word is proclaimed over the waters of our own baptism, creating a new heart within us. In baptism, we are named as God's beloved, and as members of the body of Christ. In a world of growing ethno-nationalism where exclusionary identities are promoted, baptism is a radical counterclaim. Our ethnic, cultural and other embodied attributes are precious and add to the beauty of diverse gifts that we offer to this world. Nevertheless, our fundamental identity is given by the One who identifies us in the waters of baptism as a beloved child of God.

Moreover, in baptism we receive "God's grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with [its] gifts."¹⁴ In this way, Lutherans affirm a connection between grace (charis) and gifts (charismata). Like Mary, we receive the Holy Spirit who bears its fruit in us. There is a broad and beautiful diversity of spiritual gifts across the body of Christ, because each of us receives this Spirit in a unique body embedded in a

unique family, culture and context. The story of Pentecost is one example of how the one Spirit can nurture a diversity of gifts according to diverse bodies and contexts.

Paul describes a range of gifts that are inspired by one Spirit (1 Cor 12: 4-11). They include teaching, service, healing, preaching, prophesying, and administration. Paul is clear that there is neither hierarchy of gifts nor a uniformity of expression. Through the diversity of gifts, the Holy Spirit nurtures the health of the whole body and equips every member of the body to participate in the church's reconciling and renewing mission.

DISCERNING SPIRITUAL GIFTS

The diversity of spiritual gifts is liberating. However, these gifts come with responsibility. Paul reminds the church that it must always discern these gifts. Discernment is the task and responsibility of the whole community for the community. Paul states that every spiritual gift has the potential to bear the fruit of the Spirit, which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22). There is also a warning against using gifts that do not benefit the whole body. Paul provides a clear guide for the congregation to discern gifts of the Spirit from other spirits or human capacities that would divide the body (1 Cor 2:13-15). Love is the greatest guide for discernment. The Spirit gifts always build up the entire Body of Christ in love.

The text of the Assembly theme from Ephesians affirms that spiritual gifts come from the One Spirit. These gifts of the Spirit are given "to equip the saints for the work of ministry for building up the body of Christ until all of us come to the unity of the faith" (Eph 4:12-13). Therefore, anything that divides, dislocates or diminishes another member of the body can be discerned as contrary to the work of the Spirit that inspires every good gift.

¹³ Martin Luther, "The Large Catechism," in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, trans. Charles Arand (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 439–440.

¹⁴ Ibid. Martin Luther, "The Large Catechism," *Book of Concord*, 461.

The Letter to the Ephesians encourages all to be open to one another's gifts as signs of God's grace at work in their lives. In our differences we are to bear with one another in gentleness, patience and love. The church bears the task of discerning gifts according to love. Therefore, any claim to "special revelations" or spiritual gifts that perpetrate violence, marginalize a member of the body, or perpetuate exploitative cultural, economic, or political hierarchies must be recognized as contrary to the gospel. And, all forms of violence, sexual and gender-based discrimination, systemic or institutionalized racism, caste systems, must also be renounced as an affront to the gospel.

The gifts of the Spirit stand in stark contrast to many of the spirits of our time. The gifts of the Spirit build up and reconcile. They seek justice and peace. They work toward life abundant for all whereas the spirits of the world close people in on themselves, dividing one from another, seeking only personal or national profit.

The Assembly theme invites us to engage in the mutual conversation and consolation of faith about the diversity of spiritual gifts that are found across our member churches. We are also called to the task of mutual accountability and discernment about our life together as a communion of churches. For example, how are LWF member churches equipped to reform oppressive, exclusionary, or misleading practices within our churches and societies? How can member churches accompany one another to discern God's Spirit as opposed to spirits that divide?

UNITY OF THE SPIRIT

In contexts that are increasingly divided by the many spirits of our time, a communion among churches offers a model and means to embody Christ's ministry of reconciliation for a just and peaceful world. Article VII of the CA reminds us that proclaiming the gospel and administering the sacraments are enough for church unity. Recognizing the diversity of the church, the article continues that it is not "necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by [people], should be everywhere alike." The Lutheran communion of churches

is already living in altar and pulpit fellowship as witness to the transformational promise of the body of Christ. Today, member churches are asked how their autonomy relates to their accountability to one another in communion.

At the table of Holy Communion, the body of Christ extends radical hospitality that does not discriminate according to categories of race, gender, culture, ability, etc. At the table, all are welcomed, in gratitude for what God has done in Christ Jesus. Christ's body is remembered also in welcoming the stranger, the one who is not usually at the table, just as the Israelites were called to welcome the stranger in remembrance of God's faithfulness during their days of exile.

God calls us to be part of the body of Christ, which re-members those who gather at the table with all others who also gather at the Lord's Supper. It is the Holy Supper where God is truly present in, with, and under the forms of the consecrated bread and wine. Sacraments unite human beings and their Creator as well as human beings with one another in a union that is beyond time and space limits.

When we gather for Holy Communion, the Spirit draws the circle ever wider until all creation is reconciled to the Creator. As depicted in the Lund Cross, the table breaks down barriers and Christ alone invites all to participate. At the table, we are fed in a way that nurtures faith, producing fruits of righteousness. Around the table, we find ourselves part of a diverse communion that can help us discern how we are called to rise from that table and go out into the world (*coram mundo*) to encounter Christ in our neighbors. Around the table, the work of the Spirit connects justification and sanctification, justification and justice.

Rooted in the centrality of this sacramental spirituality, the Lutheran tradition places a strong accent on the connectedness between the Spirit and the body. God promises, "I will put my spirit within you" (Ezek 36:27). Our confession implies that faith is always active in love, in service of the neighbor, all neighbors. Confessing the gospel—justification by grace through faith—means rejecting all other criteria we might impose on the gospel.

The text of the Assembly theme from Ephesians affirms that spiritual gifts come from the One Spirit. These gifts of the Spirit are given “to equip the saints for the work of ministry for building up the body of Christ until all of us come to the unity of the faith” (Eph 4:12-13).

The work of faith is precisely the dismantling of all the barriers and divisions created by human systems of dominance. The Spirit’s activity continually reaches out to the world, bringing all people together, drawing us further into the source and center of the Trinity’s transformational mission.

The LWF communion finds its source in the new spirit God places within each person and every community thereby embodying the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Ps 51:10-12

THANKSGIVING: GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT

Thanksgiving is itself a gift of the Holy Spirit that shapes the way Lutherans live in the world. Thanksgiving is a Spirit-filled response to the gospel. Thanksgiving flows forth unrestrained in good works for the building up of the body of Christ, the church, and in the ministry of reconciliation. Therefore, to be Lutheran entails a particular method and mode of being in the world, informed not solely by a set of theological or confessional propositions, but by a lived faith, a spirituality rooted in our experience of God’s Spirit through Word and sacrament and service.

Part of that lived spirituality involves discerning the Spirit through the experience of daily life. Luther’s theological method implies a critical reflection and engagement with the world, an

engagement that trusts the Holy Spirit will help us discern between law and gospel, between God's promise for life abundant and all that which is contrary to God's desire for creation. A faithful trust in God's presence in the world shapes our life as it shapes the communion of churches that we are.

As a communion of churches called, gathered and enlightened by the Holy Spirit, we bear witness to the great diversity of spiritual gifts found across the globe. The Assembly provides us with a unique opportunity to discern, express, and celebrate our diversity in our gathering, in our prayer, in our interactions and work, and in our spiritual life. We are grateful to experience the gifts of communion every day.



EXAMPLES: THE SPIRIT OF UNITY

Prayer has the power to connect people across the world. Long before the time of phones, social media and virtual meeting platforms, people prayed for each other and were thereby brought together in spirit. Member churches regularly pray with and for each other. The Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Poland, in preparation for the LWF Thirteenth Assembly, has for the first time in the history of the LWF created an intercession calendar for all LWF member churches.

The LWF is a praying communion that also embraces some of the practices from our ecumenical partners. During crises such as COVID-19, prayer resources were shared to help navigate online worship and keep people united during a time of physical distancing. Every year, member churches join with ecumenical partners in the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, and on Reformation Day. In recent years, LWF has adapted the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Prayer Cycle series to encourage the entire communion to join in dedicated weekly prayers for churches in all countries of the world.

Theological education has always been a driver of the Lutheran tradition and a seedbed for faithful discernment. While always rooted in our Lutheran heritage, theological education is future oriented. The Lutheran reformers believed that education serves to transform individuals regardless of their social status, so that they can contribute to the public welfare and peace through whatever vocation they are called to serve. Theological education was a driver of Luther's reformation, with a goal to transform individuals who would transform the world. Today, this remains the goal of theological education across our Lutheran communion. The LWF promotes transformative theological education that is contextual, creative, critical, and concrete. Following the direction of the LWF Twelfth Assembly, a network for

Theological Education and Formation (TEF) was established with participation of member churches, theological institutions, students and partners in education.

Lutheran spirituality and theology are diverse, yet united into one body, rooted in the Bible, in Word and sacrament, and our common confessions and catechism.

The Twelfth Assembly of the LWF affirmed the shared theological understanding that we are liberated by God's Grace. Lutheran identity is based on the liberating message of Jesus Christ, who in baptism declares us beloved by God. In the ecumenical creeds we confess that the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens and nurtures a diversity of gifts, by which we participate in God's reconciling mission. The Lutheran Identities study process began with a global consultation in 2019 that engaged practitioners, theologians, youth, clergy and lay leaders in discerning our baptismal call to participate in the work of the Holy Spirit. The process has featured dynamic theological reflection aimed at listening for the ways in which we sound the common notes of Lutheran identity (law and gospel, faith and works, nature and grace, justification and sanctification, or freedom and vocation) among the rich harmony of lived, contextual identities across our diverse communion. One participant reflected, "I belong to the Lutheran family with one, but diverse identity. Our unity is based on what the Holy Scripture teaches regarding the Holy Spirit and our Lutheran traditions, though our practices of common faith are shaped by diverse contexts...all deeply believe we serve and glorify the same Lord. Some of our churches have experienced Christianity for a century or less while others have many centuries of experience and resources. The Spirit is working in a way that we can learn from each other."

In 2018 the LWF organized a global conference to discern ways of countering

growing populist movements that promote racism and hate crime, which resulted in a study document *Exclusion – Global Theological Responses to Populism*. During the publication’s launch in 2019, LWF Vice-President for the Nordic Region, Archbishop Dr Antje Jackelén, reflected on responsible church leadership in the face polarization, populism, protectionism and post-truth, and patriarchy as a fifth component. Countering them, she noted, calls for a new narrative of hope and participation, including the courage to speak, pray and act. “It is not about what we can change next, but about realizing the deep sense of being transformed, of being steeped in the spirit of the gospel.”

Amid growing nationalism and populism in Brazil following elections and a new government in 2019, IECLB President Rev. Silvia Genz led the church to reflect on the hate discourse in society and how it had invaded the church and families. The responsibility of the church in such a situation, she said, was to “speak and act with great care so as not to polarize our members even more.” IECLB’s theme “My peace I give to you (Jn 14:27)” became a rallying point for creating spaces in which people could exchange thoughts, build bridges toward one another, with a goal to overcoming division, strife and hate in families, the congregation and society.

The LWF works to ensure young people have voice in shaping theology, priorities, and ministry. The Global Young Reformers Network is the main platform for young people in the communion to develop their own initiatives and methodology of working together globally. In all our activities, we emphasize practical theological and programmatic collaboration within and across regions, as well as continued emphasis on the involvement and leadership of young people at the global level and the promotion of intergenerational engagement.

Young people have grown more active in the church and society, being at the forefront of advocating and acting on various societal and justice issues that affect not only their

generation but the entire population. Still, they continue to be under-represented in decision-making bodies and processes in LWF member churches and wider society. Youth are often discouraged or intentionally kept from fully utilizing their capabilities and gifts in service to God, the church, and the world.

Several member churches have led local peacemaking initiatives and engaged in truth and reconciliation processes with Indigenous people. Since the 1990s the Lutheran folk churches of Finland, Norway, and Sweden have embarked on journeys of reconciliation in relation to the Sámi people. The same process occurred in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada in relation to the First Nations. These acts of reconciliation raise profound questions about the nature of unity, whether we speak of the gifts of cultural diversity giving form and expression to church life or in the public realm of society. In both cases, the lessons learned from these processes affirm that “uniformity” violates the dignity of God’s diverse creation and contributes to the brokenness of the world that God in Christ through the Spirit seeks to restore through reconciled diversity.

A gospel of transformation within churches can impact holistic changes in religious practices and spirituality as well as changes in culture, society and economy. Among this diversity of gifts, the one Spirit leads us to that profound unity, to real communion. Guided by the Holy Spirit, member churches embody communion more and more in their ecclesial life both locally and globally. And then the question arises: what does the practice of living in communion imply for us as church?

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

As Luther asks in the Small Catechism we ask: What is this?

Where do you experience fragmentation and the pull of many “spirits” that compete for your attention and time?

The one Spirit is known through a diversity of gifts. How can all these gifts be used to build up community, valuing every member and every gift and lead to transformation? Can you share any examples?

What does it mean to be attentive to the Holy Spirit’s work in each and every member church and in the global church? What does it mean to practice “communion” across the LWF? What does it imply for your own witness?

ONE HOPE

The Apostle Paul lists hope as one of the three theological virtues (1 Cor 13). In other words, hope is rooted in God alone and in God's promise for all creation.

Hope is the affirmation that God is faithful, that God will complete what God has begun. Hope is, therefore, the confident expectation and active waiting for God's purposes to be fulfilled and the capacity to strive for what must be altered, amended, and rectified to realize that promise "on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt 6:10).

CRIES OF DESPAIR, CRIES FOR HOPE

Yet, cries of despair resonate throughout the world. "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing (Mk 4: 38)?" These cries are all too audible in the many injustices that afflict humanity. Bodies are divided, stigmatized, commercialized, and violated. The one Spirit is dismissed and replaced by spirits of greed, dominance, power and wealth, sometimes masqueraded as the one true Spirit, leading people not to freedom but into captivity. Hope is often restricted and limited, quickly turning into hopelessness as has been already seen in many situations named in this *Study Guide*.

At the root of these hopeless cries is the denial of God's image found in every human being and the disregard for God's good intention for all creation. Despair is manifested in a divided world, a world ruled by the self-interest of the most powerful, creating a prison for many, without any possibility for escape (or freedom). As was stated in the earlier parts of this *Study Guide*, the "root of all systems of oppression, division, and exclusion lies in a fundamental refusal to see, trust, and respect the image of God in a fellow being" and "any attempt to separate the holistic unity of body,

mind and spirit threatens the inherent goodness of every creature." When human beings and creation are treated merely as bodies, devoid of the life-giving spirit, they cry out in despair, they cry out for justice.

Rather than rejoicing in the image of God found in everyone and in all of God's creation, human beings are captive to ideologies that distort God's good intention. These are ideologies that ignore the covenant between God and human beings and creation and compromise relations between human beings and creation.

Today, we hear the cries of victims of competition, one the most pervasive ideologies which sees all life in terms of a market mentality, regulating all relations by buying and selling, and rewarding merit on the basis of profitability. The world becomes a vast marketplace where the powerful and wealthy promote their own self-interest and increase their wealth and power at the expense of the poor. The gap is ever widening between the rich and poor, a phenomenon witnessed in exaggerated form during COVID-19 pandemic. The richest 10 percent of the world's population controls 76 percent of the world's wealth.¹⁵

It is more worrisome that the inequality between rich and poor has become an unstated law, considered by many as normal and necessary for well-functioning economies and politics. There is a fake hope (or lie) advancing the argument that all people will eventually benefit as wealth trickles down.

This ideology is so pervasive yet it is often unquestioned, even by those it subjects to suffering. It infiltrates all forms of thought and theory, including theological reflection. It results in a prosperity gospel (true faith will always be rewarded with material blessings) or the belief that "God helps those who help themselves" (a popular phrase without biblical warrant).

¹⁵ World Economic Forum, *World Inequality Report 2022*. Accessed 8 March 2023 (wir2022.wid.world).

Such an ideology gives free range to the powerful to continually enrich themselves at the expense of others. They can enslave people for their own benefit. For example, human trafficking and slave trade—in all its forms—is a violence inflicted upon human beings and communities by other human beings who considered it their privilege to gain power and wealth on the back, and lives of other human beings. War can be waged for no reason other than to advance personal or national or cultural interest such as is currently happening all over the world.

We hear the cries of uprooted, displaced, misplaced, immigrants and refugees, in particular victims of war and climate crisis. We hear the cries from the horrors of human trafficking and sexual slavery and exploitation. We hear the cries of all those suffering from poverty and continued economic inequality.

Deliver me, O Lord, from evildoers;
protect me from those who are violent,
who plan evil things in their minds
and stir up wars continually.
They make their tongue sharp as a snake's,
and under their lips is the venom of vipers.
Selah

Ps 140: 1-3

Cries of despair are heard when one narrative—a single story—holds sway and all others are either eliminated or made to serve and support the dominant narrative. The Christian notion of the mastery of the earth and therefore over the body has heavily contributed to the “single story” that subdues the earth and causes intersectional forms of oppression. A reading of “dominion over” (Gen 1:26-28) should occur in conjunction with humanity’s responsibility “to till and keep” the earth (Gen 2:15).

Another example of a single story is the doctrine of discovery, namely that, all un-Christianized lands and people may be claimed, appropriated, used, and basically

exploited by their “Christian discoverers” and rulers, including the church. This doctrine fueled colonial expansion for almost 500 years and has shaped much of European and Euro-American thought and even law. This colonial mentality can still be found subconsciously at work in the very fabric of theological and ecclesial methods of interpretation and doctrine. The misuse of theology in support of a single narrative continues today when a particular interpretation of Christian culture is used by right-wing politicians and extremists to impose uniformity and strengthen their claim to power and authority.

The single story has heavily impacted Indigenous people around the world. They have been subjected to extensive, long-lasting, and harsh assimilation policies seeking to destroy and eliminate their languages and cultures. Churches, including Lutheran churches, have been heavily involved in such destruction, as they sought uniformity over and against a deeper form of unity based on rich diversity. Uniformity destroyed the dignity of God’s diverse creation. It contributes to the brokenness of the world. One story from the Sámi people illustrates this tragedy.

“I only spoke the Sámi language when starting school. We were not allowed to speak Sámi, neither in the classroom nor in the school yard. It took me 3 years to fully understand what was going on. I have 5 years of primary school. That is my education. The only thing we learned was that our Sáminess was a hindrance when entering the Norwegian society.”¹⁶

In North America, the residential schools were established to destroy many indigenous cultures, resulting also in the destruction and death of children in particular. In Canada, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission put renewed focus on the destruction as did the discovery of hundreds of unnamed graves of indigenous children. The residential school system forcibly separated indigenous children from their families and forbade them

¹⁶ Tore Johnsen citing the story of Simone Johnsen (1918-1987) in “The Body and Spirit of Reconciled Diversity Unity beyond Uniformity, Hierarchy, and Anthropocentrism. A Sámi perspective,” in *Assembly Reader – LWF Thirteenth Assembly* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2023). Accessed 8 March 2023 (www.lutheranworld.org/resources/publication-theological-responses-one-body-one-spirit-one-hope).

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to acknowledge their Indigenous language, heritage, and culture. Children were severely punished if they were caught speaking their native language or acknowledging their culture. The goal of the “education” was to “kill the Indian in the child.” Destruction and death could not be more blatantly named.

We hear the cries of Indigenous people and all those whose cultural diversity has been distorted and destroyed in structural and systemic ways. We hear the silent cries of victims of genocide in all its forms. The cries of those murdered at Auschwitz-Birkenau, at countless concentration camps in Siberia, the Rohingya in Myanmar, Yazidis in Iraq, in conflicts over ethnicity and control of economic resources such as those killed in Cambodia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and in so many other places across the globe, who have been murdered because of their identity did not conform to a humanly defined “norm.” We hear the cries of those who are trapped

in many invisible and hidden concentration camps created by oppressive values of society.

Guard me, O Lord, from the hands of the wicked;
protect me from the violent
who have planned my downfall.

The arrogant have hidden a trap for me,
and with cords they have spread a net,
along the road they have set snares for me.

Selah

Ps 140:4-5

Today, many, especially young people, experience eco-anxiety—“the chronic fear of environmental doom.” It has a growing impact on the mental health of children, young people and communities with the fewest resources. Those who experience the effects of climate change will not only be burdened with physical consequences (heat-related stress, respiratory diseases, allergies or even pandemics), but also “an increased risk of depression, low mood, extreme mental distress, post-

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *Life Together*: “Self-justification and judging belong together in the same way that justification by grace and serving belong together.”

traumatic stress disorder, suicide, and further deterioration in those with a history of mental illness.”¹⁷ Grief arises. Climate grief is a form of disenfranchised grief. It is the human response to the increasing annihilation of our environment: “the loss of species, ecosystems and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change.”¹⁸

The human will to dominate over others is one of the root causes of suffering. Dominance subjugates others to personal and communal interests. When an individual or a community are turned in upon themselves (*incurvatus in se*), the criterion of all judgement is the self. The “I” (whether individual, community, ethnicity, nation, religion) becomes the center

and all others are judged, classified, subjected to a humanly created agenda, not to God’s plan or desire that is life abundant for all.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *Life Together*: “Self-justification and judging belong together in the same way that justification by grace and serving belong together.”¹⁹ Self-justification leads to judgment whereas justification by faith leads to service. Self-justification is a turned-in-upon-oneself, self-referential, fascination and anxiety. Judgment necessarily follows as other people and things are subsumed to a personal or communal interest. Other people are categorized and creation is used. Both result in an objectification of the other for another’s own purposes.

¹⁷ Mala Rao and Richard A. Powell, “The Climate Crisis and the Rise of Eco-Anxiety,” *The British Medical Journal*, 6 October 2021. Accessed 8 March 2023 (blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2021/10/06/the-climate-crisis-and-the-rise-of-eco-anxiety).

¹⁸ Ashlee Cunsolo/Neville R. Ellis, “Ecological grief as a mental health response to climate change-related loss,” in *Nature Clim Change* 8, 3 April 2018, 275. Accessed 8 March 2023 (doi.org/10.1038/s41558-018-0092-2).

¹⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 94.

I say to the Lord, "You are my God;
give ear, O Lord, to the voice of my
supplications."
O Lord, my Lord, my strong deliverer,
you have covered my head in the day of battle.
Do not grant, O Lord, the desires of the wicked;
do not further their evil plot.

Ps 140:6-8

Even Scripture has been subjected to the tyranny of one narrative. In the field of biblical interpretation, academic research that had its roots in European universities, had for a long time a tendency to ignore the cultural, socio-economic, and political realities in which readers find themselves. In the 17th century, Lutheran Orthodoxy taught that each word of Scripture was inspired verbally, and no attention needed to be paid either to the context wherein the text was written or to the context of the readers. Luther himself had a far livelier and Spirit-inspired way of reading the Scriptures.

Interpreting the Bible in the spirit of Lutheran Orthodoxy means that one is attached to only one specific time in the history of theology. Contextual reading of the Bible is then criticized as "giving in to the changing times we live in." And yet the Gospel calls it to be contextually interpreted and proclaimed. The Lutheran interpretative model of law and promise (Apology of the CA IV) is applied anew in every different context. For example, biblical interpretation in Africa is the struggle for a place to be, a home.²⁰ But to fight for a home is above all to fight for independence of perception and thought²¹ and not simply acquiesce to a single narrative brought by missionaries and a colonial structure. The prologue of John affirms that the Word became flesh and established his home among us (Jn 1:14). This embodiment has consequences for us all.

The embodiment of the Word in Jesus Christ, within a particular time and place, calls us to listen to the many ways God is embodied in our neighbors. It means listening to the truths as found in many different cultures and contexts.

A single story too easily becomes hegemonic, claiming all truth for itself or even inventing "truth" to further its goals. Today, speech itself is threatened when conspiracy theories arise and when facts and reason are condemned and ridiculed as fake news.

When a single narrative permeates everything, all systems and structures and rituals and thought, it is urgent in our time to de-colonize those structures and institutions, those rituals and thought-patterns, breaking down the barriers of classification and division. The yearning for communion, deep within the human family, comes to expression even if, at times, only as lament.

Those who surround me lift up their heads;
let the mischief of their lips overwhelm them!
Do not let the slanderer be established in the land;
let evil speedily hunt down the violent!
I know that the Lord maintains the cause of the
needy
and executes justice for the poor.
Surely the righteous shall give thanks to your name;
the upright shall live in your presence.

Ps 140:9-13

EYES TO SEE

The Thirteenth Assembly theme calls us, as church to hope, enkindled by the Holy Spirit, and to share this hope with all creation. This gospel hope leads us on God's path of ever-new beginnings and renewal.

Hope is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit that human beings cannot generate from within themselves. Hope originates when a promise is spoken from the outside. In the Christian tradition, hope is built on nothing else than Jesus Christ who speaks words of promise for salvation and liberation to all God's creation. Those words are spoken to every Christian at their baptism. The rite of baptism enacts the promise that is spoken and in which our life is now enveloped.

²⁰ Musa W. Dube, "The Scramble for Africa as the Biblical Scramble for Africa: Postcolonial Perspectives," in M. W. Dube et al. (eds.), *Postcolonial Perspectives in African Biblical Interpretations*, (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 1-28.

²¹ Jean Koulagna, *Exégèse et herméneutique en contexte: réflexions méthodologiques*, (Yaoundé, Dinimber & Larimber, 2014), 80-81.

In Scripture, a life of hope was born and generated when Israelites were given news of liberation from the tyrannies of different leaders. God says: “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt. I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down...” (Ex 3:7-8). God comes down—a kairos moment—and saves. God promises the people a future with hope (Jer 29:11).

Hope, in these prophetic messages is liberation from all oppressive powers. From a biblical perspective, hope is deeply connected to the covenantal relationship between God and humanity. Such hope encourages the people to forge ahead despite many and different difficulties, knowing God is with them in the boat on the stormy sea (Mk 4:35-41).

The covenant is made real for every individual in baptism. When we remember our baptism, when we give thanks for our baptism, we are not just looking back to some past event, we are not looking back at baptism as something that happened once, and which does not impact us now. On the contrary, we are remembering our baptism as a present reality, as something that is continually calling us forward, inserting us, not in our self-constructed agendas, but into God’s life, into God’s action who is continually reclaiming and reconciling all creation to God’s self.

This new beginning immerses us into discipleship, into a practice of hope, knowing that God’s promise never fails, and that God’s love will never abandon us. The unique characteristic of a baptismal disciple or practice incorporates the individual into a community of hope where the promise is celebrated in Word and sacrament. The local church becomes like ferment in the dough. In worship, as Luther notes, we are formed into Christians. This happens through both thanksgiving and lament. Here, we become recipients of hope and entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation, of communion building, of service to the neighbor.

For the writer of the Letter to the Ephesians, the Holy Spirit directs all things to their fulfilment, to the unity—communion—that God intends. This Spirit-led dynamic is part of our ecumenical vocation. We, as baptized in Christ, sealed by the Holy Spirit, are called to participate in God’s renewal of creation, in God’s act of reconciling all creation to God’s self, in God’s act of reconciling human beings and communities one to another. This vision of unity is a cosmic vision of one body, in one Spirit, transformed by one hope. Ephesians sees all humanity and creation in one movement toward communion.

The Letter to the Ephesians insists on hope. Why? Hope is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It knows what God has done in Christ, sees it continually surfacing in everyday life, and waits for the fulfilment of God’s promises. Hope animates that movement toward communion. Hope liberates from powers and principalities of this world and encourages believers to forge ahead despite the many obstacles surrounding them. Hope unites, creating solidarity in both expectation and action. In this dynamic towards an ever-deeper communion, diversity is not displaced, dismissed, destroyed, or dominated. Rather, diversity is celebrated as every person and community is invited into God’s reconciling action.

In the context of Christian faith, hope is much more than positive optimism. Addressing the June 2021 online meeting of the LWF Council during the difficult time of COVID-19, LWF President Archbishop Dr Panti Filibus Musa described hope as “one of the most powerful gifts we can offer to our time . . . because all that we expect to still happen has already happened in Bethlehem, at the cross in Golgotha, and in Christ’s resurrection.”²² Hope is the realization of God’s immeasurable goodness. Hope is a gift of the Spirit that comes from the promise of cosmic reconciliation. This hope is “eschatological,” that is, it is already present but not yet fully realized. This hope is realized where faith in Christ moves us to participate in the Spirit’s work to renew the face of the earth, and reform unjust systems towards the justice and goodness God intends for all.

²² The Lutheran World Federation, “Address of the LWF President” at the Meeting of the LWF Council Video Conference, 18–23 June 2021. Accessed 8 March 2023 (www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/20210618_-_council_-_exhibit_10_address_of_the_lwf_president.pdf).

Luther's Small Catechism teaches us that this hope is expressed when we pray, "your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We pray that God's will "come about in and among us." And God's will is precisely to hinder every evil scheme and resist the temptation of power, wealth, and domination that cause injustice.

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As we pray that God continually breaks down the barriers within us and among us, we discover in fact that God is already breaking down those barriers. This act has already begun in our baptism. In baptism, we are drowned, that is, we are undone. We enter the font with nothing but are pulled up with everything, our identity in God, an identity that is rooted in a communion, in a call to be God's people, a call to participate in God's work.

Our solid hope is also that God through Christ will defeat all the evil powers at the end of time and envelop creation in God's own goodness. We have been promised "in hope that the creation itself will be set free from

its enslavement to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom 8:21). This is the one and fundamental hope upon which we base our lives.

A theology of the cross names things as they are and speaks God's promise, and hope into those contexts. We dare to name things as they are in this world and have the courage to act so that they do not remain as they are. Through our faith in God's promise, the presence of injustice creates in us a righteous anger on behalf of all victims of trauma, exclusion and violence. The Spirit pushes us to participate in God's work of establishing justice, making peace so that all may have abundant life and creating with God a trustworthy world.

A well-known quote attributed to Martin Luther but not found in his writings, says that when asked what he would do if the world were to end tomorrow, he answered, "I would plant an apple tree today." Hope is rooted in this trust that God is continually creating, reconciling, renewing. "In fact, God's kingdom

comes on its own without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may also come to us” (Small Catechism, Lord’s Prayer, The Second Petition).

THANKSGIVING: HOPE STEMMING FROM PROMISE

Where we feel righteous anger at the injustice and abuse of power that we experience in our societies and churches, the Assembly theme points to hope as grounded in the horizon of God’s promise to reconcile creation in peace and justice. Baptism calls us into participating in God’s act of reconciling the world. It defines our vocation to be one humanity, one creation, one body, to be “little Christs” as Luther wrote. Through baptism Christians are called to be God’s servants in the world, called to be witnesses through worship, proclamation, diakonia, humanitarian work, advocacy in the public space, and through ecumenical and interfaith commitment.

Many signs of hope are visible within the LWF communion of churches. These signs embody a theology of the cross and reinterpret it anew in today’s context. Reasoning, critical

thinking and analysis, have their right place, calling a thing what it is. The community is marked by truth-telling, by genuine speech, not by fake news, conspiracy theories, and beguiling superstitions. Truth-telling speaks truth to power, as in Mary’s proclamation, the Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55). A story shared by our Anglican sisters and brothers tells how, at the height of colonialism, nascent multinational companies (such as the East India Company) forbade the singing of the Magnificat during evening prayer so that the poor would not question the colonial narrative.

Another example is the Church of Sweden’s public apology in 2021 for its role in “legitimized repression” and centuries of “mistreatment and complacency” toward the Sámi People. The apology to leaders of regional Indigenous groups took place in the Cathedral of Uppsala, at a special worship service of the General Synod.

“As Archbishop of the Church of Sweden, I stand before you, the Sámi, and confess that we have NOT engaged with you at eye level. We have been curved inward on ourselves, we have not stood up to racism and abuse of power. Our backs are bent by the guilt we carry. We have placed unjust burdens on you. We have burdened your ancestors with shame and pain that has been inherited by new generations.”
Archbishop Dr Antje Jackelén.

EXAMPLES: SEEDS OF HOPE

Our communion continues to proclaim stories of prophetic, persistent hope. Unlike mere optimism, Christian hope is grounded in God's promise. Nothing will separate us from the love of God. Where Christ is present in faith, the Spirit sustains us with the hope that bears the fruit of love. We know and experience this promise during the worship and work and in the fellowship of our communion.

Altar and pulpit fellowship across the LWF means that we have friends in Christ around the world who gather in fellowship around the Word and sacraments to be nurtured by the same promise, vision, and experience of hope. When Lutherans work and live together as a global communion, we form and expand our collective identities as children of God and create bonds of faithful friendship through which we can experience that future that God has promised.

Hope is rooted in the gift of faith and moves us to act for justice in the world. In the history of the LWF, there are many stories to tell about cross-cultural, interfaith, and international relationships that became life-lines for hope in times of despair. Below are examples of this can be seen in the life and work of the communion.

The onset of online communication for many churches opened up the church "space" to more members and visitors.

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread, churches in many countries responded to lockdowns, by offering online worship. During the last three years of the pandemic, the LWF used technology to care for church leaders who are normally caring for others even as they face their own personal challenges. Before COVID-19, bishops from the 55 LWF member churches in Asia, had met in-person once every two years at the Asia Church Leadership Conference. But the pandemic 'forced' the leaders in the region to rethink how we could support one another. They set up new online

fellowships that took place regularly, offering a different forum to talk about the pandemic situation. These were not webinars or virtual workshops that the church leaders needed to lead, rather, they were spaces for them to worship together, share each other's burdens, and pray for the church and the community.

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the LWF Rapid Response Fund (RRF) became a symbol of the Lutheran communion's solidarity with the most vulnerable churches and communities.

Through quick action from 2020 to 2022, LWF could bring relief to tens of thousands of vulnerable people whose lives, livelihoods, and human dignity faced further risk.

Funds channeled toward nearly 200 member church projects by the end of 2022 ensured that church members and others in the community had access to face masks, hygiene and sanitation kits for protections against the virus, food and medical assistance, and communication tools for online services and pastoral care.

In Indonesia, for example, the Simalungun Protestant Christian Church (GKPS) donated food to the elderly and to 180 families in its Bangun Panei congregation, an area which had been isolated for several weeks due to extraordinary coronavirus prevention measures by the government. The church also purchased a camera to produce worship videos for distribution on the GKPS YouTube channel, with an average of 4,200 viewers on Sundays. In 2022, the LWF established a Communion Solidarity Fund, that builds on the experience of the RRF and is meant to enable churches to show solidarity by supporting other member churches dealing with crises.

The Nordic Lutheran churches collaborated in a joint project called "Baptism in times of change" to analyze

surveys and research material that had revealed a declining number of infant baptisms throughout the region. In a series of webinars, researchers, analysts, church leaders and social science practitioners from LWF member churches in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden discussed the views of parents who participated in the surveys. These ranged from belief in the church creeds to an individual's right to choose religion, and one of the parents being non-Lutheran. The recommendations at the end of the project called for exploring variations in baptismal practice, special services and liturgies for different contexts and age groups. "It has been encouraging to experience new ways of working together as churches," said the project's manager, Prof. Dr Harald Hegstad from Norway. Hegstad noted that while situations appeared similar in the respective countries, there were many differences, which helped to shed light on individual situations. One example is the assumption that baptisms are part of the main Sunday service, whereas baptisms in fact take place in homes or dedicated services in some churches. "To learn that other churches have a differing practice has led to renewed reflection on own practices," said Hegstad. Too, the COVID-19 pandemic affected baptism practices. There was an increase in the number of private baptismal services, but it remains to be seen whether the pandemic caused permanent changes overall in the baptismal practices among the Nordic churches. The project was part of a wider initiative "Churches in times of change," which is the region's response to a 2017 LWF Assembly resolution inviting churches to create platforms for exchange and learning about the changing church in the face of secularization and other societal and demographic factors.

In the face of increasing psychological distress among youth and polarization in their communities, LWF Youth are leading the way in living hope and peace building throughout the member churches. The LWF Global Young Reformers Network chose peace as their thematic priority in 2022. Each quarter, youth leaders from different LWF regions convened gatherings of mutual

support and learning which have included over 200 youth. They prayed together and discussed peacebuilding, leadership, and hope. Additionally, nearly 100 youth have been trained in the LWF Peace Messengers Program since 2017. After each training they return to their churches with a youth leadership grant to implement projects to share what they have learned and engage in peace building in their own communities. For Juan Carlos Orantes Rodríguez, Salvadoran Lutheran Church, being a "peace messenger in El Salvador is not only about transmitting the message, but also helping people to find peace in themselves and provide a different view of having hope for the future."

Symbols of Hope is an LWF program that aims to raise awareness about the risks surrounding irregular migration

in areas with limited access to international organizations or government authorities.

Through partnerships between LWF member churches and civil society partners in three countries—Ethiopia, Nigeria and Zimbabwe—churches and local congregations are equipped to welcome the stranger, provide essential services, facilitate integration into the host country, and support internally displaced persons as well as returnees with skills training and seed funding so that they can (re)build their lives and gain new tangible perspectives in their home country. In Ethiopia alone, the Symbols of Hope awareness raising efforts had reached more than 36,200 potential migrants in 2021. Members of the self-help women's groups are among 400 returnees and 100 potential migrants who had received training for sustainable small-scale businesses. In addition, 400 religious leaders, pastors, and diaconal workers had received capacity training to provide psychosocial support.

LWF member churches in other countries also signs of hope for people on the move. Millions of people from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Venezuela and other Latin American countries continue to attempt to migrate in search of better life and work opportunities. The poverty and violence emanating from the deteriorating social,

economic and political conditions in the region in recent years, has increased the number of potential migrants who resort to paying exorbitant fees for risky irregular processes run by human traffickers. Through its Central America program, the LWF provides practical support and alternative solutions to those who are forced to return home to Honduras. In Olancho department, the World Service program offers returnees skills training for employment in carpentry, electricity and welding, as well as equipment and materials to start-up community and family micro-enterprises, and awareness building to discourage new departures.

LWF advocacy work speaks out against all forms of oppression, physical and spiritual. Through dialogue and advocacy, member churches engage in the global struggle for a just society. The LWF embodies a network of hope in the way it connects member churches to international processes that protect vulnerable people and strengthen human rights mechanisms. In recent years, LWF has developed a Local to Global (referred to as L2G) approach to link local level action for change to national and international level advocacy through the UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process. In the midst of injustices perpetuated, gospel hope will always find a way to re-establish and promote justice. For example, both Tanzania and Uganda have experienced a rapid increase of teenage pregnancies during the pandemic. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania has been very active in advocating for the young mothers to be allowed to return to school.

The LWF has also worked with local communities within member churches to promote land rights in Angola, the right to water for refugees in Ethiopia, strengthen refugee and civil society networks in Kenya, promote women's rights and address sexual and gender-based violence in Uganda, campaign against child marriage in Mozambique, strengthen local leadership and good governance in Nepal, and campaigning for the rights of children and birth registration in Myanmar. The aim of our engagement in

human rights processes is to mobilize the hope, action and vision of local communities, and bring their voices to the UN Human Rights Council's process and other international accountability mechanisms. LWF's local to global advocacy creates networks of hope that produce the fruits of real change at the local levels.

Through young people, many LWF member churches continue to mobilize activities for the care of creation. In France for example, the United Protestant Church of France has kept alive the climate theme through their annual youth festival, the Grand KIFF, which in 2021 brought together over 400 young people aged 15-20 years to discuss the theme "The Earth We Share." They engaged in dialogues about who they are as individuals, their place in the world, how to live with others, including those who are excluded, and how to act sustainably together. The goal is to define how young people can act in the world from their respective levels and contexts and pass on the lessons learned to those around them.

Often, the way that our member churches embody this stubborn hope in the future God has promised reveals a path to peace and reconciliation that had not been previously seen or imagined. Such is the case with the role of LWF member churches and World Service country programs in Colombia and Venezuela. While the Colombian peace accord of 2016 brought an initial decline in violence, conflict-related violence has since taken new forms and serious abuses continue. Human rights defenders, journalists, Indigenous and Afro-Colombian leaders, and other community activists face pervasive death threats and violence. In the face of all these situations, the continued commitment of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Colombia (IELCO) is a visible embodiment of embodied hope. IELCO ministries, along with World Service and diaconal projects serve the community through churches and schools. They protect vulnerable women, children, and families; they support the communities of the Atrato River (Chocó) by securing international recognition of the rights of the river; they

conduct education on the risk of mines in the country and strengthen food security in rural communities through training in agroecological techniques; they accompany local organizations in their advocacy processes. IELCO Bishop Atahualpa Hernandez notes that the presence of the LWF “strengthens the communion of the national church and the communion of churches worldwide.”

Rooted in God’s promise, hope sustains member churches in their ministry and, as a communion, they open a way of peace and reconciliation that can transform societal structures and worldviews and inspire a gospel rooted hope in others.

Hope is not abstract hope but experienced as shared energy invigorating people’s movements to mobilize, to rise, to speak up and to speak out against injustices, as the dry bones rose and became a living multitude (Ezek 37:1-14). Signs of hope emerge with signs of healing and signs of resilience and resistance against abusive powers. Hope is always shared hope, among all peoples and all creation. Hope constantly gathers momentum and power to grow into a larger movement with greater expectation of change and transformation. Hope is constitutive of communion.

Despite the storms around the community, despite ongoing difficulties, Christians find hope knowing that God is present and continually reshaping every formless and empty space with the creative work of the

Spirit. No displacement, division, or destructive narrative of uniformity is a match for this Spirit because the Spirit lingers on long after the sun sets on humanly devised and imposed narratives. As a plow is used to prepare a field before sowing, the Spirit of God plows through our reality, making previously hard and unfertilized ground into good soil.

Division was planted within society by human beings curved in upon themselves, yet church, gathered around Word and sacrament, stands as an antithesis to this narrow gaze and self-serving focus. The communion witnesses the continual dismantling of self-centeredness and false and disparaging narratives. It is clothed in Christ who gives himself for all.

Church as communion can be described as a community of hope, a community of promise, celebrating unity in reconciled diversity, witnessing to that hope that God who calls human creation in to one body is at work, continually nurtured by the Holy Spirit. And this hope is not far off or inaccessible. Christian hope is alive in the church’s witness (martyria), in proclamation in Word and sacrament (leitourgia), through service to every neighbor in need (diakonia) and in engagement in the public space with ecumenical partners and with interfaith cooperation.

As in the Letter to the Ephesians, the hope for reconciliation is large, ever widening the framework of our imagination. It is a cosmic hope that draw us ever deeper into God’s holistic mission.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

As Luther asks in the Small Catechism we ask: What is this?

In what part of life does your community feel the greatest anxiety or trauma related to exclusion or division?

How do you discern God's call to hope in the face of present conflict and anxiety? How is hope transformative?

In what ways can the mission of LWF member churches in communion be signs of hope in this world?

INVITATION TO UNITY

A COMMUNION OF COSMIC HOPE

LWF member churches are invited to reflect on what it means to be a communion in the world today.

How can the theme of the Thirteenth Assembly, One Body, One Spirit, One Hope, inspire the proclamation of the gospel for generations to come? How can the Lutheran story as part of the broader Christian story be told in light of the cry of the Earth, ecological, social, ecclesial, economic and political injustices that continue to divide and dominate? One Body, One Spirit, One Hope calls for an embodied theology of the cross, a robust embrace of the diversity of gifts of the Spirit that build up the body, and a sacramental experience of hope that transforms our anxiety into action and inspires a readiness to be surprised by the ways we are called and equipped to participate in God's mission.

God, through the work of the Holy Spirit, continues to create, reconcile and renew all that is seen and unseen. Within God's cosmic mission, the church has a mission to continue the ministry of reconciliation that was begun in Christ Jesus and entrusted to the church in the world. In the midst of suffering in the shadow of sin, the church is called and sent to witness as a body, in the unity of the Spirit, to the hope that is in us. Our hope lies in God's promise to liberate creation from powers and principalities of this world.

The Acts of the Apostles describes Pentecost as the Spirit's in-breaking, praising a beautiful diversity that creates new possibilities for proclaiming the good news and engaging in the ministry of reconciliation. The Revelation to John culminates with an image of all creation being transformed. "Then I saw a new heaven

and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more" (Rev 21:1). The tree of life with its diversity of fruits and leaves exists for the healing of all creation and the renewal of Earth into the peaceable realm of God's Garden (Rev 22:1-5).

Scripture reminds us that life in our universe began in God's creative love of unity in diversity. That cosmology shapes who we are. This cosmic story encompassing the beginning and the end, the Alpha and Omega, orients and shapes our relationships to other beings and all creation in our time. While political, economic, and social systems of domination result in exclusion, we confess that God's vision is inclusive, calling us always into God's continual creation: reconciliation. Here we see the cosmic importance of faithfully understanding unity in a world of reconciled diversity.

The Apostle Paul describes how the gospel addresses all people in their diversity. Paul reminds believers of their call to embody love and peace, rooted in the source of unity revealed in Jesus Christ and in which believers participate through baptism (1 Cor 9:20, 22).

Through baptism, we are called to actively participate in this mission. Baptism into the body of Christ makes of us a new people, the church. As Paul writes the body of Christ implies a diversity of beings reconciled into one body. Differences do not need to be divisive (1 Cor 12). Diversity is once again experienced as a gift. In this body, diverse members can once again experience the unity of the Spirit, in one body, one Spirit, and one hope (Eph 4:4). Living into that baptismal call to unity, we find ourselves growing ever more fully into a communion, as God's gift.

LWF's story is about becoming a communion that is carried by this cosmic hope. Our story began prior to the Second World War when, faced with the many forces that threatened to

create a divided world, Lutherans were striving to unite in theological reflection on what it means to be Lutheran, what it means to be committed to unity in the one body of Christ.

The Seventh LWF Assembly held in Budapest, Hungary, in 1984 hosted the first Assembly conversation about what it meant to be a communion of churches. The assembly affirmed the Trinitarian basis for thinking of our relationships in terms of communion (*koinonia*).

“The true unity of the church, which is the unity of the body of Christ and participates in the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is given in and through proclamation of the gospel in Word and sacrament. This unity is expressed as a communion in the common and, at the same time, multiform confession of one and the same apostolic faith. It is a communion in holy baptism and in the eucharistic meal, a communion in which the ministries exercised are recognized by all as expressions of the ministry instituted by Christ in his church. It is a communion where diversities contribute to fullness and are no longer barriers to unity. It is a committed fellowship, able to make common decisions and to act in common.”²³

Already, this description pointed to what it meant to be a communion of Lutheran churches in altar and pulpit fellowship, by referring to the gospel, and the centrality of the Word and Sacrament. The Budapest Assembly went on to affirm:

“We give witness to and affirm the communion in which the Lutheran churches of the whole world are bound together. This communion is rooted in the unity of the apostolic faith as given in the Holy Scripture and witnessed by the ecumenical creeds and the Lutheran confessions. It is based on ‘united witness before the world to the gospel of Jesus Christ as the power of God for salvation’ (Constitution of the LWF, III.2.a). And it is based on agreement in the proclamation of the gospel and celebration of the sacraments (CA, Article VII). This Lutheran communion of churches

finds its visible expression in pulpit and altar fellowship, in common witness and service, in the joint fulfilment of the missionary task, and in openness to ecumenical co-operation, dialog, and community. The Lutheran churches of the world consider their communion as an expression of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.”²⁴

Through Word and sacraments, the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens and liberates us for life and ministry. Word and sacrament are the means of grace through which our *koinonia* as a communion of Lutheran churches are grounded. These means challenge us to reflect upon how we can carry one another’s burdens, how the Holy Spirit reconciles diverse members in a common confession that embodies our hope for unity in diversity.

The Eleventh Assembly in Stuttgart in 2010 described communion as a gift and a task. On the one hand, communion is a gift that lives from God’s gift of unity in the Body of Christ. On the other hand, communion is a task in which members must be accountable to one another for the shape of their lives and ministries according to our common confession and constitution. What is the nature of the gospel that is the core of our life in communion? What does it mean to proclaim the Word and administer the sacraments according to the gospel in diverse places across our communion? How does the Word of God create and affirm both unity and diversity? What does it mean that the gospel entails freedom, while demanding the accountability of respect and bearing with one another in the love of the Trinity who unites us?

The Thirteenth LWF Assembly theme, “One Body, One Spirit, One Hope,” encourages us to continue to embrace the gift and task of being communion for our time.

“One Body” invites us to give thanks for the blessing of bodies, and to listen for the cries of bodies who continue to be marginalized, excluded or violated. Bodies cry out, calling

²³ Statement on the “The Unity We Seek,” in *LWF Report No. 19/20, Proceedings of the Seventh Assembly, In Christ – Hope for the World* (The Lutheran World Federation, Geneva: 1985), 175.

²⁴ Ibid. “Statement on the Self-Understanding and Task of The Lutheran World Federation,” *LWF Report No. 19/20*, 176.

How does our communion respond to Peter's appeal to "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you" (1 Pet 3:15)?

this communion to listen, to amplify, to heal and to re-member into one Body. The contexts in which we live and worship have been deeply affected by the physical isolations demanded by COVID-19 restrictions. This global experience of a pandemic has focused our communion's collective attention on the importance of bodily presence and the embodied nature of the church. What does it mean that God's action through preaching and sharing the sacraments addresses the whole person in our bodily and spiritual self? What does it mean that we are sent out to serve the whole embodied being of our neighbor?

"One Spirit" invites us to consider the diversity of the Spirit's gifts that exist across our communion for the building up of community. The one Spirit nurtures the Word to grow within diverse bodies born to diverse families who live in diverse languages and cultures and yet all

participate in God's plan of reconciliation. How can we, as a communion of churches, embody mutual accountability, faithfully tending those gifts of the Spirit so that they bear diverse fruits in our lives and our churches? In our communion, how are diverse gifts nurtured, understood, invited, and welcomed to participate in the mission of the church? What language do we use to address differences? How do we as a communion of churches create the space in which we can discern between the gifts of the Spirit and those spirits of the age that would continue to divide, dominate and destroy the body?

"One Hope" invites us to consider how our churches proclaim hope, the ways in which our communion embodies the experience of God's Kingdom, full of grace and peace in our midst, and the ways in which our communion participates in God's continual action of

reconciling the world to God's self. In a world torn asunder by war and narratives that drive ecological, social and political conflict, how can a communion of reconciled diversity help people resist fake news and tell anew the story of life according to a horizon of hope? How does our communion inspire people to renew their

communities through acts of loving service that heal bodies and souls, establish justice, and make peace? How does our communion respond to Peter's appeal to "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you" (1 Pet 3:15)?





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