



# The Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion



THE  
LUTHERAN  
WORLD  
FEDERATION

A Study Document



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**A Study Document**

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# Preface

*Martin Junge*

The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) is a lively and engaged communion of churches. Its member churches share altar and pulpit fellowship and bring their spiritual and material resources together in order jointly to participate in God's mission in the world. This communion is alive because God calls it into being and sustains it. Living together as a communion of churches is a gift entrusted to the churches. In responding to God's call, the LWF has committed itself to the ongoing realization of the communion. As a gift, the communion is something we receive; as a task, it is something to which we commit ourselves to labor toward. Since its beginnings, the LWF has grown tangibly in ecclesial density. This is visible in its structures and practices: it can be seen in the constitutional texts and governing structures, as well as in how it meets, works and celebrates together.

As the Lutheran communion journeys towards the Reformation Anniversary in 2017, the LWF wants to attest to what it means to be an ecclesial communion from a Lutheran perspective. One of the phrases that has become a hallmark of Lutheran ecclesiology is "unity in reconciled diversity." At all times and in every place, churches discern how faithfully to live out the message of the gospel in their contexts. As part of this process, they are called to review and examine cultural and socio-ethical paradigms in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Careful responses to the particular contexts are an important aspect of credibly communicating the message of the gospel. At the same time, the mutual accountability of churches in different contexts is part of their commitment to the catholicity of the church of Jesus Christ.

At its 2013 meeting, the LWF Council asked me to engage the

member churches in further theological reflections on how to respect the autonomy of LWF member churches' decisions and express and deal with

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the resulting differences, while at the same time upholding their commitment to live and work together as a communion of churches.<sup>1</sup>

The Council commended the document “Claiming the Gift of Communion in a Fragmented World,”<sup>2</sup> my reflection in preparation for the 2013 meeting of the LWF Council. A working group, comprising seven members representing different regions and areas of expertise, was appointed by the Meeting of Officers in late 2013 in order to begin this joint process of reflection. The working group was tasked with preparing a study document on “The Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion” to be presented to the Council in 2015 and, subsequently, for use by the member churches. During the drafting process, the regions had the opportunity at various leadership meetings during 2014 and 2015 to engage in conversation on the understanding of communion.

Last but not least I would like to express our deep gratitude for the hard work and commitment of the members of the working group, Guillermo Hansen, Minna Hietamäki, Allen Jorgenson, Annika Laats, Hance A. O. Mwakabana, Elisabeth Parmentier and En Yu Thu, to this eighteen-month process. Their individual contributions<sup>3</sup> gave voice to the diverse expressions and understandings of the concept of communion within the LWF.

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<sup>1</sup> Message of the Council of the LWF, 17 June 2013, at [www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Council%202013%20Message%20-%20Gift%20of%20Communion.pdf](http://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Council%202013%20Message%20-%20Gift%20of%20Communion.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Agenda. LWF Council 2013, Exhibit 9.0.1.

<sup>3</sup> *Understanding the Gift of Communion. The Quest for a Shared Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion. A Reader* (2014), at [https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DTPW-Self-Understanding\\_Communion-low.pdf](https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DTPW-Self-Understanding_Communion-low.pdf)



# The Lutheran Communion of Churches—A Gift and a Task

Walking together as a Lutheran “communion”—what does this mean for how we live, act and conduct our journey together as churches?

According to Lutheran teaching, communion is both a gift and a task.<sup>4</sup> Because it is a gift, it also engages us as a task. It is first given to us, so that we are able to give out of the abundance of our receiving. Communion comes into existence in hearing the Word and receiving the sacraments—in becoming part of the body of Christ revealed to faith in the shape of the cross. The gift of such a communion is rooted in the Triune God.

Under the theme of “gift” this document examines the promissory character of God’s Word to us. The God of Jesus Christ addresses us in the mode of promise thereby enabling us to receive the gospel in various ways, and so awakening us to diversity as a gift in itself. This gift, however, is also a task. Those who hear, see, feel, taste and smell the gospel, embrace the task of following Christ. This involves paths of diversity amidst unity. This gospel is not our project, but rather it projects us into the world for the sake of love, for the sake of God.

Each member church is already internally engaged in this dialogue, aware that fidelity to the gospel demands clarity about its message and its consequences for lived faith. The aim of this text is to articulate the LWF’s member churches’ shared affirmations of faith that are relevant and vital at all times and, especially, during times of disagreement in the communion, in order to find strategies for discerning our life together.

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<sup>4</sup> “However, the church is not only an association of external ties and rites like other civic organizations, but it is principally an association of faith and the Holy Spirit in the hearts of person.” Cf. Articles VII and VIII of “The Apology of the Augsburg Confession”, in Timothy J. Wengert and Robert Kolb (eds), *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 174.



# The Gift of Communion

## **The Lutheran World Federation experiences the gift of oneness in the communion**

The first constitution of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), adopted at the 1947 Assembly in Lund, defined the LWF as “a free association of churches” that “shall have no power to legislate for the churches belonging to it or to interfere with their complete autonomy, but shall act as their agent in such matters as they assign to it.”<sup>5</sup>

At the 1984 Budapest Assembly, the member churches that had, together, faced many difficulties and deepened their mutual commitment, adopted a statement on the “Self-Understanding and Task of the Lutheran World Federation.”<sup>6</sup> With reference to Article VII of the Augsburg Confession, the statement affirms:

This Lutheran communion of churches finds its visible expression in pulpit and altar fellowship, in common witness and service, in the joint fulfillment of the missionary task, and in openness to ecumenical cooperation, dialogue and community. The Lutheran churches of the world consider their communion as an expression of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. Thus, they are committed to work for the manifestation of the unity of the church given in Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup>

The LWF was then defined as

an expression and instrument of this communion. It assists the Lutheran communion to become increasingly a conciliar, mutually committed communion by furthering consultation and exchange among its member

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<sup>5</sup> Article III.1. of the constitution of the Lutheran World Federation (as adopted by the LWF First Assembly, Lund, Sweden, 1947), see Jens Holger Schjorring, Prasanna Kumari, Norman A. Hjelm (eds), *From Federation to Communion. The History of the Lutheran World Federation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 527.

<sup>6</sup> Carl H. Mau (ed.), Budapest 1984. “In Christ – Hope for the Word.” *Official Proceedings of the Seventh Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, LWF Report No. 19/20* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1985), 176.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

churches and other churches of the Lutheran tradition, as well as by furthering mutual participation in each other's joys, sufferings, and struggles.<sup>8</sup>

The history of the LWF is one of responding to the gift of communion. Starting in the early twentieth century, some Lutheran churches have made the effort to come together as representatives of the same confessional tradition, both locally and internationally. Two moments of the emerging communion can be distinguished: a moment of jointly responding to needs so serious and pressing that they can neither be overlooked nor dealt with by an individual church, and a moment of internal discussion and explication of the mind of the churches. The constitution of the LWF has functioned as a relatively stable text that has not only guided but also been adjusted in response to the developing communion's self-understanding.

The 1990 Assembly in Curitiba defined the mutual commitment of this communion of churches more precisely:

The Lutheran World Federation is a communion of churches which confess the triune God, agree in the proclamation of the Word of God and are united in pulpit and altar fellowship.<sup>9</sup>

This development from federation to communion reflects an evolving understanding of an ecclesial relationship.<sup>10</sup> The concept of "communion" is based on the biblical notion of *koinonia*, and belongs to the heritage of all Christian churches.<sup>11</sup>

## Communion is a gift

According to the New Testament, communion/*koinonia* points to the significance of the "communion of saints" as the communion of believers who share Word and sacrament, worship and prayer, and the gifts of God.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Article III, [www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Constitutions%20EN%20final\\_0.pdf](http://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Constitutions%20EN%20final_0.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> In the past, for example, a church in the global South would have had a relationship with a missionary society or church department in the global North, but not a church as a whole.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. John Reuman, "Koinonia in Scripture: Survey of Biblical Texts," in Thomas F. Best and Günther Gassmann (eds), *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia: Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order*, Faith and Order Paper No. 166 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994), 37–69; Barbara Rossing, "Models of Koinonia in the New Testament and the Early Church," in Heinrich Holze (ed.), *The Church as Communion. Lutheran Contributions to Ecclesiology*, LWF Documentation 42/1997 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1997), 65–80.

Paul's notion of *koinonia* demonstrates the formation of a body of relationships based on the invitation of the gospel and the fellowship at the table. In 1 Corinthians 10:16 and 1 Corinthians 11:23–25, the body and blood of Jesus Christ in and through the wine and bread of the sacrament become foundational in demonstrating and strengthening *koinonia*. People of different backgrounds eating together meant participation in Jesus Christ and implied new relationships with one another. This breaking down of ethnic boundaries that would have naturally stood between the different members of the *koinonia* is shown in the way in which Paul confronts Peter's party for discriminating against the Gentiles (Gal 2). We can also observe that later in Acts, the Hebrew and Hellenistic fellowship "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship [koinonia], to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42).

The notion of altar and pulpit fellowship within the LWF as a communion of churches comes from this basic criterion of apostolic tradition, mutual learning and sharing in the sacraments.<sup>12</sup> In this context, the various needs of the other become apparent and hence the need to establish structures to meet these needs in more just and equitable ways (Acts 2:44–47; 4:33). *Koinonia* is therefore presented in the Bible as an act of God that moves people to God and to one another, and in a special way, this move results in meeting needs and upholding life.

Becoming a communion is a gift to the churches.

Communion with Christ comes about through the preaching of the Gospel, which awakens and is embraced by faith, and through the sacraments, which strengthen and are received by faith.<sup>13</sup>

This communion with Christ through faith and participation in his saving work implies deep solidarity with one another and intrinsically includes the sharing of material and spiritual resources. Furthermore, this impels mutual commitment and common life and action. The communion is lived out

not [in] a coerced and prescribed uniformity. It realizes itself in a variety of forms. It lives and works through the multiplicity of gifts it receives and the variety of tasks placed before it.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. "The Augsburg Confession—Article VII: Concerning the Church," in op. cit. (note 3), 42.

<sup>13</sup> *Communio/Koinonia. A New Testament-Early Christian Concept and its Contemporary Appropriation and Significance*, A Study by the Institute for Ecumenical Research, Strasbourg (1990), 8f.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 10.

In all this, the communion

looks beyond itself. It lives from its communion with the Lord, who is Lord and Savior of all creation and serves him as sign and instrument for the salvation of the world.<sup>15</sup>

This is the unity we share. The communion of the Lutheran World Federation is based on the theological reality of oneness in Christ.

## **The Gift of oneness is lived in unity and diversity**

The basic understanding of the church as communion includes the idea that unity exists with differences. Living in unity is the result of the Spirit of God acting among us through Jesus' prayer "that they may be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us" (Jn 17:21), which strengthens our relations as Lutheran churches and with other churches in the world. Ecumenical dialogues have provided an opportunity for the Lutheran churches to discern their joint understanding of being a communion. In dialogue with their ecumenical partners LWF member churches have begun to describe the form of community as unity in visibility, diversity and dynamism.<sup>16</sup> Communion is to become historically manifest, visible and recognizable to the world.

Our communion is made visible through Word and sacrament and celebrated with partners as together we serve others. In the LWF, the unconditional love of God expresses itself in the collaboration with others as we serve those in need. As Lutherans we identify this as diakonia, which is an integral part of our identity and unifies us in the life of the communion.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Ways to Community. Lutheran–Roman Catholic Joint Commission*, 1980, at [www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/l-rc/doc/e\\_l-rc\\_way.html](http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/l-rc/doc/e_l-rc_way.html), paras. 32–41.

# The Task: Discerning and Living out Communion

## Autonomy and accountability

To be a member church of the LWF, a church must formally accept its doctrinal basis, be an “autonomous” body and consist of more than one congregation.<sup>17</sup> This understanding of membership accords well with the definition of the LWF as a “Federation.” It reflects the tendency of international organizations at the time of its inception to identify themselves as institutions constituted by independent communities that agree to work together for a purpose. Until the 1990 LWF Assembly in Curitiba, Brazil, this understanding served the LWF well. The churches discovered that the concept of autonomy should be understood in light of the evolving understanding of being both—autonomous and accountable to the communion. This implies mutual commitment and varying relationships of accountability. Increasingly, member churches recognized that a foundational accountability identifies our relationships with each other and our identities.<sup>18</sup>

Paul’s language of the church as a body is but one manner in which accountability can be conceptualized (1 Cor 12:12–31). We are also aware of the importance of the theme of relationship for the motifs of the church as the people of God and as the temple of the Spirit (1 Pet 2:9; 1 Cor 6:19). Autonomy, then, is understood not as a stark independence but as a self-realization that is interdependent with the life of the other churches. In this sense autonomy and accountability are inseparable.

We are shaped by the reality of being a communion where communities are deeply affected by their interactions with one another and with their contexts. These relationships are defined by accountability. The freedom that defines the task of being a communion of churches is a freedom to be in service to the other and with the other. We are accountable to those whom we serve. Being bound to one another, paradoxically, is not the destruction of freedom, but its fullest expression. Together, with the other, we grow in

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<sup>17</sup> *LWF Bylaws*, 2.2.1, at [www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Bylaws%20EN%20final.pdf](http://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Bylaws%20EN%20final.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *The Church. Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper 124 (Geneva: The World Council of Churches, 2013), 10: “The biblical notion of *koinonia* has become central in the ecumenical quest for a common understanding of the life and unity of the church.”

our witness to the gospel that frees us for the neighbor. Our hearts rejoice when sister churches flourish and are heavy when they suffer (1 Cor 12). Because of this relatedness, members of the communion are in various ways affected by the events and decisions made by others in the communion.

As we are called to provide an account for the hope that is within us (1 Pet 3:15), we are answerable to our contexts as well as to the members of the communion. Thus, we know that our accountability to other churches must also take into account our socio-cultural contexts and our responsibility to the environment.

The communion's theological and spiritual reality has unfolded in various ways and is influenced by political, historical, geographical and cultural factors. These include for example:

- The relationship to the state or governance and the consequent external conditions for the churches
- Questions related to minority and majority positions within local contexts and the LWF family
- The expansion of Lutheran churches by missionary activities and forced or voluntary migration
- Changes in social and political conditions
- Changes in the understanding of the human person
- Attention to environmental concerns
- More recent developments in travel, mass media and information technology
- Ecumenical and interreligious relations.

Further to the above, the churches within the communion are self-governed institutions with legal constitutions. Church law governs various aspects of the life of an individual church, such as who is eligible to receive communion or to be ordained to the ministry. The various principles expressed in church law reflect both a theological understanding of the church and local conditions. Both of these are culturally mediated.

One of the signs of the LWF's commitment to living in communion is that its various expressions seek mutual recognition. Yet, both theological interpretations and institutional expressions may either facilitate or hinder mutual recognition.



## Shared decision making

As a communion the LWF member churches need forms of shared decision making. Some forms of joint decision making already exist in matters of shared concern and responsibility.<sup>19</sup> The institutional bodies that exercise joint decision making include the LWF Assembly, Council and Meeting of Officers. Member churches have also taken joint decisions on ecumenical relations such as approving the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* in 1999 and by the Assembly's decision publicly to express its deep regret and sorrow to the Mennonite World Conference in 2010 over the persecution of Anabaptists by Lutheran authorities and especially over the fact that Lutheran reformers theologically supported this persecution.

Procedures for mutual consultation regarding decision making in the member churches that may have affect relations within the communion need to be further developed. Mutual consultation presumes adequate time for consultation and anticipates that everyone involved feels that their viewpoint has been heard and duly noted, even if they remain in disagreement.<sup>20</sup>

## Disagreements in the communion

As members of the same communion, the churches have started to ask themselves how to engage with disagreements in the communion in a critical but constructive way. Moreover, the commitment to doing this is in itself a witness to the power of divine love in the midst of a world where differences too often result in factions.

Diversity is a healthy reflection of our common faith and faithfulness to the gospel. However, there are certain differences that lead to disagreements that may become harmful for the communion. What constitutes an obstacle for the shared life in the communion? Which criteria will help to distinguish acceptable and non-acceptable differences?

In the following section resources for discerning a response to such questions are proposed. It is hoped that these will serve the LWF family well as it faces the reality of difference and disagreement now and in the future. Among today's important challenges, the churches of the communion face questions regarding family, marriage and sexuality. While some churches have taken official positions on these issues, others have

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<sup>19</sup> Examples of concern include climate change, ecumenical relations and humanitarian aid.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. [www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/2006-porto-alegre/3-preparatory-and-background-documents/guidelines-for-the-conduct-of-meetings-of-the-wcc](http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/2006-porto-alegre/3-preparatory-and-background-documents/guidelines-for-the-conduct-of-meetings-of-the-wcc)

not. And then there are those that are in the process of discerning how to engage with these questions. In 2007, the LWF Council received the resource “Proposed Guidelines and Processes for Respectful Dialogue” to assist the member churches in this process. Its preface states that, since the LWF is a communion of churches, “no member church can ignore the issue or consider it closed (in one way or another) while sister churches are still struggling with it.”<sup>21</sup>

The reality of contentious issues within the LWF is not new. In the past, crises have sometimes actually contributed to the transformation of the federation into a communion.<sup>22</sup> In considering present points of tension it is noted that what for some churches appear to be socio-ethical or pastoral decisions are for others doctrinal issues. For both, however, it is a question of being true to the gospel. Considering current controversies, such as the ordination of people with homosexual orientation and the blessing of relationships between people of the same gender, some approach these issues under the rubric of the pastoral imperative to be inclusive, while others assert that entertaining such a decision can undermine the integrity of the communion. For this reason, we should not qualify these issues as “socio-ethical” alone but also as issues of church order and discipline that play a role in the proclamation of the gospel.

A first exploration should be devoted to the weight of the theme in discord: Does it compromise fundamental Lutheran preaching and teaching? Or, is it related to cultural and social pre-understandings? For Reformation theology, the concept of *adiaphora* was employed for matters pertaining to human traditions, rites and ceremonies and so marked a space for acceptable differences.<sup>23</sup> However, in certain situations even matters considered by some to be *adiaphora* can carry such weight that churches cannot remain indifferent.<sup>24</sup> It is the task of the members of the communion to engage these matters in a sound theological manner for the sake of our common faithfulness to the gospel and the fellowship within the communion.

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<sup>21</sup> *The Lutheran World Federation: Marriage, Family and Human Sexuality. Proposed Guidelines and Processes* (2007), at [www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Exhibit%2010%20Report%20Task%20Force%20English.pdf](http://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Exhibit%2010%20Report%20Task%20Force%20English.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> An important historical reference in this regard is the LWF’s engagement of the issues of apartheid in South Africa. In responding to this situation the communion made decisions that gave the LWF a certain “ecclesial density.” This was not to be understood in a bureaucratic way (as if the LWF were a “super-church”), but in the sense that the fullness of the Lutheran church expresses itself also in its relationship worldwide, as a network of churches.

<sup>23</sup> “The Augsburg Confession—Article VII: Concerning the Church,” in op. cit. (note 3), 42, 2–4.

<sup>24</sup> “Solid Declaration, Article X: Ecclesiastical Practices,” in op. cit. (note 2), 635–40.

This process of engaging in theological discernment needs to be elaborated and clarified.

## **Resources for accountable decision making**

In light of the complex issues experienced by the communion, we turn again to the gifts at the heart of our identity. Presented below are some of the resources that can orient the communion in the task of discerning how to live together in the midst of diversity. These follow a structure beginning with the Word as the central gift that constitutes our identity.

### **The gospel is the core of our life in communion**

#### ***Our conviction***

The unifying core of our Christian faith and of our Lutheran confessions is our salvation in Jesus Christ by grace through faith, witnessed in Scripture that reveals God’s unconditional love for us (Eph 2:8). No other tradition or human prescription can be the foundation of this gift of grace in Jesus Christ.

The conviction shared by all churches of our communion is that the reality and gift of God’s justifying grace is the foundation of Christian belief and life, and that Christian practice and “good works” follow from faith, which looks to grace for unity (Gal 3:25–29). This unity is established by the Word that constitutes the church as the visible body of Christ. Hearers of the Word have been called into the reality of this new creation (2 Cor 5:16–21).

The Reformers insisted that in order to understand the new relationship that God establishes with us one must distinguish two accents in God’s address.<sup>25</sup> It is not that God has a twofold mind, but that we are torn by two opposite forces that make us hear God’s voice differently—either as a will demanding conformity to external moral laws, or as a promise to renew our whole existence by granting to us a new identity in Christ. God’s radical assurance can only be embraced and lived out in the awareness and experience of what God calls us to be in the midst of our vain attempts to fulfill God’s law.

The biblical stories address us through a multiplicity of voices, genres and styles. They speak realistically about what we are and what we have done, and

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<sup>25</sup> See Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian, 1520,” in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther’s Works*, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 327ff.

hopefully about what we are called to be—what is possible when God touches our hearts, bodies and minds. For example, God’s gracious commands are God’s call authorizing us, in the midst of fear and temptation, to realize our humanity in a trustful relationship with God and our neighbors, both human and all forms of life. Even though the content of the divine command is always love, God’s commandments turn into an unbearable law when they touch lives that are turned in upon themselves. These lives are contemptuous of God’s justice, mercy and compassion. They are lives allergic to God’s preferential option for sinners, estranged ones and the suffering.<sup>26</sup> Such lives do not delight in the good news of God’s merciful embrace of the outsider. Rather, they seek to justify their existence by pointing out the “sinner” to judge and condemn, and so prove their own superiority and election. By faith our lives are based on a foundation outside of ourselves; our lives are founded in Christ. Living by grace through faith means that our life is outside ourselves, and so beyond our disposal.<sup>27</sup> Our life becomes united with this other, this stranger, the One who calls us to trust in God and love, and practice justice towards our neighbors. The mystery presented in Scriptures is that one can only be in unity with oneself by surrounding one’s ego with Christ and the needs of the neighbor.<sup>28</sup> Clothed anew by God and the needs of others we become what we are called to be, truly human beings.

### ***Need for discussion***

Although justification is by grace through faith, and our unity is grounded in divine action, churches may make decisions that make it more difficult for us to experience communion and so “grieve the Holy Spirit of God” (Eph 4:30). Even if good works are not the condition for justification, we are responsible for a trustful witness to our neighbors and to others, and we are obligated to help one another to act according to our Christian faith in changing times. Nonetheless, contextual demands require churches continually to discern law and gospel in response to pastoral needs and political realities, and may cause churches to make decisions that other churches might not understand.

Members of the communion should be able to disagree with each other’s decision without necessarily threatening the unity of the communion. This is true on condition that such a decision is not deemed to compromise

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<sup>26</sup> Martin Luther, “Heidelberg Disputation, 1518,” in *ibid.*, 57 “Therefore sinners are attractive because they are loved; they are not loved because they are attractive.”

<sup>27</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “History and Good [2],” in Clifford Green (ed.), *Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 250.

<sup>28</sup> Luther, *op. cit.* (note 25).

the common affirmation of justifying faith. But since it is not always easy for churches in different context to appreciate pastoral considerations in other contexts, it is always helpful that members of the communion keep each other informed with regard to how they are trying to remain faithful to the gospel despite their contextual demands.

## **Word and sacraments are events of communion**

### ***Our conviction***

In the Augsburg Confession, the church is identified as evident in those places where the gospel is preached purely and the sacraments are rightly administered.<sup>29</sup> According to CA VII, it is enough (*satis est*) for the true church and its unity that we preach the gospel and celebrate the sacraments properly. God promises that this church will last forever.<sup>30</sup> This description of the church accords with the observation that the gospel which is made flesh is received via the human senses. There is no immediate reception of the gospel. We hear, see, feel, taste and smell the gospel via the ordinary. God uses the ordinary to do the extraordinary, and so affirms creation as good (Gen 1:31). Indeed, Luther speaks to the ongoing nature of creation, and so allows us to understand that the effluence of goodness testifies to God's ongoing affirmation of diversity.<sup>31</sup> This diversity is itself a reflection of creation and of our being made in the image of God (Gen 1:27 and Ps 8). We receive God diversely because God addresses us in various ways.

We are a communion of churches united through Word and Sacrament. This holds us together in a more profound sense than any constitutional requirements. [...] Whenever and wherever we gather in local congregations to hear the Word and celebrate the Sacraments, we are reminded that we do so as part of the communion of saints worldwide. This wider communion must become for us more than an abstract, faceless reality. We must be able to touch, hear, taste and experience this reality firsthand. Through God's grace, we are able, in solidarity, to share our pains and joys, our burdens and gifts.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> "The Augsburg Confession—Article VII: Concerning the Church," in op. cit. (note 4), 42, 2.

<sup>30</sup> "Apology of the Augsburg Confession—Article VII and VIII: The Church," in op. cit. (note 4), 175.9.

<sup>31</sup> Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Bohlaus, 1883-1993), 39/II, 293.

<sup>32</sup> Ishmael Noko, "Why Does the Lutheran Communion of Churches Gather in Assembly," in *LWF Tenth Assembly Update No 1*, March 2002, 1–2, at [www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/35561769/first-assembly-update-lwf-tenth-assembly-2003](http://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/35561769/first-assembly-update-lwf-tenth-assembly-2003), Cf. Gal. 6:1.

We who are loved know that love has not only looked upon us, but has also embraced us. Baptism is the divine gift that is our daily garment.<sup>33</sup> Each day the eternal touches time so that the ordinary is made fit for the extraordinary. Of course this is as true for the communion as it is for the individual, since Baptism is a gift given to the church as well as to its members. Day by day the church is being remade in the image of the crucified one who lives by giving the divine self for the sake of the world, which includes us (Phil 2:5–11). Baptism is the event of our being emptied, so that we might be an echo of the divine voice.<sup>34</sup>

The Lutheran church also confesses that the church of Jesus Christ becomes what it eats and drinks at the Supper of our Lord. Holy Communion is our union with both Christ and the saints (1 Cor 11:17–34). Yet, a certain asymmetry attends this union. We do not become Christ in our participation in the meal; we become the body of Christ at the meal. Christ remains the head of the body because Word and sacrament remain the means by which Christ rules the church. The sacred meal is the means by which the church is constituted as body, and a body is only a body insofar as it is diverse. This broken body called the church is a people at the table, tasting that the Lord is good; our dinner conversation, now prayer, rises to the Lord of the banquet; our prayer now a scent as rich and as varied as the odors that rise from tables the world over (Ps 141:2). We are diverse, but diversity is a part of the mystery of our salvation (Rom 12:3–8). We have been justified and our justification does not only validate diversity; it produces it.

### ***Need for discussion***

In certain regions of the LWF there are people who desire Baptism but can only do so at considerable expense to themselves or their loved ones. There is need for the communion to acknowledge their faithfulness even though they are unable to experience Baptism.

The past history of the LWF has shown that the place where conflict and division appear among the baptized is at the Lord's Table. Because worship is a sign and expression of our salvation, our being able to celebrate worship and share the Eucharist together as one body of believers demonstrates our communion: when we are unable to celebrate together, our communion is damaged.

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<sup>33</sup> "The Large Catechism—[Fourth Part:] Baptism," in op. cit. (note 4), 466.84.

<sup>34</sup> Martin Luther, "Psalm 90," in Jaroslav Pelikan (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 13 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 119.

## The message of the cross heals our brokenness

### *Our conviction*

The church is, above all else, the church of the cross, which is ever being rehearsed in our lives (1 Cor 1:18–25). Luther reminds us that wherever we see the cross or hear the cry from the cross, there is the church.<sup>35</sup> This is also true of the Lord's Prayer.<sup>36</sup> This is because the church under the cross prays feverishly, pleading with God for each day's needs for the world; pining for the eradication of evil as God's will is worked into the world with the hallowing of the divine name (Mt 6:9–13). This prayer is the contour of the sacred cross, each petition sketching the cross from different vantage points to the end that we know that each day of bread is a day of prayer, a day of grace, of faith, of salvation.

Above all else, the life of the church is an event of salvation: of grace evoking faith so that that this little band of beloved followers listens for the voice of their shepherd (Jn 10:27), seeing in unexpected places crosses traced on foreheads—visible to faith alone.<sup>37</sup> We confess the church to be a community touched by contagious holiness so that we begin to explore our forgiveness as the divine mandate to touch the untouchable. In touching the broken we discover ourselves transformed as we are given a prophetic vocation, which challenges the wisdom of the world, refusing both conservatism and liberalism that ignore the gospel call for solidarity with those rejected.

### *Need for discussion*

The church under the cross is a church that recognizes the difference between healthy and dangerous humility. Historically, the theme of the cross has also been misused to oppress and deprive others of their voice. People who are marginalized because of race, gender, status, or class ought not to hear the message of the cross as a validation of their oppression, but as an affirmation of God's solidarity with them and accompaniment in the story of liberation that is the history of God. Awareness of this God who liberates us by walking with us engenders in us a healthy humility that lives with open hearts, hands and minds.

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<sup>35</sup> Martin Luther, "On the Councils and the Church, 1539," in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 41 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 165.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>37</sup> Martin Luther, "Sermons on the Gospel of St. John," in Jaroslav Pelikan (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 23 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 334.

## **The Word of God creates and affirms both unity and diversity**

### ***Our conviction***

The Word of God, mediated through the Holy Scriptures, is the source of ecclesial communion and of the church's life, hope and belief. The testimony of the Holy Scriptures is not a monotone but a choir of many different voices. Diversity, then, is sanctioned in Scripture (Gal 2:7–10). Therefore it is essential to be aware of the range of scriptural utterances contained in the Bible rather than to focus on a narrower selection of texts.

This diversity is reconciled through the shared core of the Scriptures: all Lutheran churches affirm the basic authority of Scripture interpreted through the hermeneutical key of the gospel of the liberating grace given in Jesus Christ. Moreover, those who follow Jesus find themselves facing the fundamental questions that people are asking in their contexts because Jesus leads us into the world (Mt 28:18–20). Beyond this, as we read Scriptures, we do so with a cloud of witnesses looking over our shoulders (Heb 12:1–2), and so we take their voices seriously, as well as the voices of those outside the Lutheran communion. While grounded in Christ, this polyphonic reading of Scripture allows for a plurality of interpretive possibilities and knows that the serious engagement with others might also mean the discovery of points of profound disagreement.

### ***Need for discussion***

The churches are looking for reliable ways of dealing with the conflicts of interpretation concerning Scripture in relation to daily life. How can we faithfully consider biblical texts in their own historical context and engage these same texts in contemporary contexts in ways that are both faithful and relevant? How might we do this when addressing issues that did not exist in biblical times (e.g., bioethical issues that arise with technological advances)?

Sometimes the deep divisions in biblical interpretation are said to be linked to confessional or geographical contexts while they might actually reflect internal divisions, resulting from different hermeneutical orientations. Each church should be able to explain why and how biblical arguments are used in the discussion. As a communion of churches, seeking a common witness in the world, we continue to strive together to explore mutually renewing ways of biblical interpretation.



## The gospel entails freedom, respect and bearing with one another

### *Our conviction*

A Christian is lord of all, completely free of everything

A Christian is servant of all, completely attentive to the needs of all.<sup>38</sup>

Evangelical freedom is a freedom shaped by service, recognizing that humans do not experience absolute freedom. Therefore, while churches are autonomous insofar as they are self-governing, freedom cannot be construed in isolation from engagement with the neighbor and the environment (Lk 10:25–37). Sometimes, the neighbor makes decisions that we do not feel free to make. In such situations, the churches may be called to bear with one another, respecting differing choices as expressions of their own freedom. This bearing with and respect implies two things: on the one hand, we refuse to affirm that choice as our own (Gal 5:1); on the other, we bear with each other by supporting them insofar as we are able.

Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling-block or hindrance in the way of another. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. [...] Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. [...] The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God. Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve. [...] We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor (Rom 14:13–14, 19, 22; 15:1–2).

Because we engage our freedom in our own contexts, it is inevitable that disagreements will emerge. As we bear with each other with a respect for the others' freedom as well as our own freedom we realize that we can endure this difference when we enter into relationships with one another in humble service. Member churches are commended to recall that all are, in different ways, both the strong and the weak. Furthermore, we are called to attend to the gospel truth that the cross subverts our definitions both of being weak and strong insofar as we use them to our own advantage. Serving one another is our antidote to pride and our path to bearing with the other in love. This relationship of respectfully bearing with others

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<sup>38</sup> Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, translated and introduced by Mark D. Tranvik (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 50.

and recognizing their freedom in respect does not entail indifference to integrity, but commends us to listen and serve above all else (Gal 6:2).

***Need for discussion***

In respecting the other we recognize that freedom implies that each one of us has the right to a different opinion. We bear with the right of the other to think and to live in a different way, even if we do not recognize our own convictions in their behavior.

This is not indifference, but a costly choice: it is costly because we suffer as we recognize the others' freedom to choose another attitude, without forgetting our convictions. The capacity to respect and to bear with is only possible for those who have strong convictions. The communion will need to explore healthy forums for mutual correction, exhortation and encouragement.

# Points for Further Consideration

## **1. As a communion of churches, we are called to mutual accountability. In concrete terms this implies:**

- Being open to receive the gifts and to be enriched by the various traditions living within the family of Lutheran churches; striving for truthful identification of the other and avoiding unfounded prejudices
- Creating occasions for more intensive and direct knowledge of the other (including worship, piety, artistic and cultural achievements and service to society)
- Having the freedom and the space to ask them to explain their decisions
- Committing to a patient dialogue about decisions taken by the member churches so that members of the communion experience their voices having been heard
- Investigating and clarifying local traditions and practices and evaluating them in light of shared theological principles so that altar and pulpit fellowship across the whole communion is strengthened.

**The churches in the communion are responsible for considering the impact of their decisions on the communion and engaging in respectful dialogue with others.**



## **2. As a communion of Lutheran churches we share the hermeneutical principle of reading biblical texts from their core: the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ. In concrete terms this implies:**

- Fostering joint ways of hearing the multitude of scriptural voices and strengthening a common orientation towards the Holy Scripture that does not diminish the diversity and dynamism of the Word of God
- Understanding that the Word of God is transmitted in a variety of traditions and specific historical contexts

- Giving opportunities for joint critical hermeneutical reflection and study
- Recognizing the importance of the Lutheran Confessions and the relevance of their contextual reception.

**Plurality of interpretation is legitimate there where it does not contradict the gospel of salvation, the work that Christ has done for us and the chief article by which the church stands or falls.**



**3. As a communion of churches, we are called to pay attention to the diversity of voices. In concrete terms this implies:**

- Proclaiming and exercising pastoral care in ways that enable the participation and acceptance of all
- Strengthening teaching and practices that foster inclusion shaped by the gospel
- Gaining wisdom from our ecumenical and interfaith relations
- Welcoming the stranger also in some ways that may expose our own vulnerability.

**Churches should increasingly engage in various forms of accompaniment and hospitality. This is crucial in times of strained relationships. The development of the communion demands an exploration of the relationship between autonomy, as stated in the current constitution, and accountability necessary for the communion.**









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