

# Society and Church – Changing Landscapes

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## Introduction

Dear participants, it is such a joy to be with you here in Helsinki at the Mission Partnership consultation. I am grateful for the opportunity to offer some reflections on the topic “Society and Church – Changing Landscapes”.

How do landscapes change in a literal sense? – On their own, landscapes change extremely slowly. The formation of the Alps took more than 100 million years and is still ongoing (creating a crisis for some villages and livelihoods in Switzerland today). The “quick” formation of the Baltic Sea took more than ten thousand years. Landscapes may wear seasonal clothes, but the flow of the mountains, the run of the rivers, the lay of the land change extremely slowly.

The pace of change quickens, though, when humans enter the landscape. Within 22 years – between 1958 and 1980 – humans eradicated the deadly disease of smallpox worldwide, a disease that had affected 50 million people annually, killing every fourth victim.<sup>1</sup> Within 50 years, the population of Lagos, Nigeria, has grown from 1.4 million people to over 18.9 million people, and the city changed from an agricultural and commercial center to the biggest African megacity, a center of economy and culture for the whole continent.<sup>2</sup> The increase in population in general and the need to draw from more industrialized ways of producing food has contributed to the fact that during past 40 years, humans have destroyed 26% of the Amazonian rainforest for cattle pasture, soy production, mining, and infrastructure.<sup>3</sup>

The way in which human beings interact, not only with the physical landscapes around them but how they impact and design environments in a broader sense, that is, social environments and landscapes, is a reflection of prevalent philosophical, ideological, and religious ideas. Today, the

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<sup>1</sup> WHO website: [https://www.who.int/health-topics/smallpox#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/smallpox#tab=tab_1) .

<sup>2</sup>[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/367938290\\_Urban\\_Sprawl\\_and\\_Growth\\_Prediction\\_for\\_Lagos\\_Using\\_GlobeLand30\\_Data\\_and\\_Cellular\\_Automata\\_Model#pf4](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/367938290_Urban_Sprawl_and_Growth_Prediction_for_Lagos_Using_GlobeLand30_Data_and_Cellular_Automata_Model#pf4) (see p. 4).

<sup>3</sup> <https://amazonwatch.org/assets/files/2022-amazonia-against-the-clock-executive-summary.pdf> (p. 8.12-13). 90% of this deforestation is illegal (Amazon Investor Coalition, Amazon Deforestation Damage and Recovery in Numbers: <https://amazoninvestor.org/amazon-deforestation-damage-and-recovery-in-numbers/>).

technological revolution continues in many unexpected ways and confronts us with questions about anthropology, about the means to manipulate public opinion and therefore also the question about guiding decision-making in societies. Consequences are profound both on physical as well as social landscapes. For us as Christians, the question we ought to be asking is: “What is our role and task in impacting the landscapes around us?” “What kind of landscape does God call us to co-design?” “What is God’s mission in this world?”

In order to stay true to its enduring mission, the church needs to engage with changes in society – testing everything; holding fast to what is good; and abstaining from every form of evil (1 Thess 5:21). This is an immense challenge. The motto of today’s consultation, “Forgive us our trespasses”, invites us to self-examination. How have we engaged and how will we engage the changing landscapes of which we are part. It invites us to ask if and where we might have failed our mission in the past, how we may fail it today, and in the future: what we might have overlooked, what we might have misinterpreted and where we simply just weren’t listening carefully enough. Faith, however, always frees us, liberates us to be obedient and follow God’s call to participate in God’s mission, making the new creation in Christ a little more visible in this world. We live and act in faith, that is, in the assurance of things hoped for (Hebrews 11:1).

The question: “How we as Christian communities should interact with the landscape around us and in what ways should we contribute to re-designing it?” as well as the question: “What kind of Christian communities do we need for this task?” invite us to take a closer look at the context that surrounds us today. I will therefore begin with some remarks on the current context and will after this reflect on how the LWF understands its mission and the role of the church in the public space in the midst of today’s realities. Finally, I will offer some reflections on “hope”, the key notion of the new LWF Strategy that was approved by the LWF Council this past June.

### **Changing landscapes: Today’s main global challenges in church and society**

Be it as individuals, be it as groups: Our identity is shaped by many factors – social, biological, spiritual, economic, and historical. These factors are part of the “changing landscape” in society. They all interact in complex ways. In order to find the concrete shape of our vocation, we need to integrate these diverse and shifting aspects. “[I]n reality, we cannot speak about a faith-based

identity apart from all other cultural, historical, social, economic, political, and biological realities of life.”<sup>4</sup> Understanding these realities helps us to realize what factors consciously or unconsciously impact the way we read Scripture, how theology is done, and how the church’s role in society is understood.

The LWF brings together 150 member churches from all parts of the world, forming a global communion of more than 78 million Christians. The churches differ in their size whereas the true size of a church always depends on the strength of its witness. They also differ in their histories and in their cultural context. They are also challenged by differing views on the role of religion in society. The LWF offers to all its member churches a global platform for mutual sharing, mutual responsibility, and for joint reflection on what it means to confess and witness to the Gospel. The Lutheran confessional heritage – liberated by God’s grace – is at the heart of our work and helps us define how we can walk our talk – what are the actions that should grow from our faith convictions.

In preparation for the LWF Strategy 2025-2031, we carried out a largescale context analysis and collected input from all seven LWF regions: Africa, Asia, Central Eastern and Central Western Europe, the Nordic region, Latin America and the Caribbean region and North America. Listening to the churches gave a good overview of some of the major contextual challenges. Although these differed of course according to regions, there were a number of issues almost all the regions raised. I would like to highlight a few of them, referring also to some global data. Then I will move to a reflection on how churches and Christian communities can or should witness in the midst of these realities.

**The position of church in society:** In the Global North and in highly industrialized countries, declining church membership and increased secularization continues to be a highly relevant topic. For many historical and large folk churches this is a major challenge as it comes along with diminishing resources and the need to redefine one’s position in society. At the same time, there is an increasing acknowledgement that the forecasted “death of religion” is not happening, but religion is changing its shape, becoming more syncretistic, less institutionalized, as different religions and faith groups “compete” with each other to attract possible followers. The notions of

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<sup>4</sup> “*Now there are varieties*”: *A study document on Lutheran Identity in the global Lutheran communion*, Geneva 2023, p. 9.

“believing without belonging” and the “privatization of religion” describe well the context in many parts of Europe. Many are looking for guidance and for meaning in their lives. In highly secularized countries, public opinion would often like to see religion pushed into the private sphere. It should be noted though that the wish to place religion in the private sphere does not only characterize the public opinion in societies that represent the principles of laïcité or are highly secularized. The same tendency can be found among some Christians who would also like to “privatize” religion by keeping it among a small number of “truly faithful” who distance themselves from the “evil” world and avoid engagement with the public space.

At the same time, religion as such is not losing ground worldwide; several studies have shown that population growth continues to be faster in highly religious countries and vast majority of world’s population is projected to have a religion in year 2050 with only 13 % having none<sup>5</sup>. LWF member churches in the Global South have grown immensely in numbers in the past decades and are soon about to outnumber the church members in the Global North. Who would have imagined this in 1923, during the first Lutheran World Convention where only 3 % of all Lutherans were living in the Global South?

The question of whether religion will gain or lose influence thus depends on any given context, as does the question about religious freedom and how freely one is actually able to practice one’s religion<sup>6</sup>. At the same time, the question needs to be raised what kind of influence religion has and will have. Seen from a sociological point of view, religion has a potential to be both a uniter and divider. This is also true for Christianity. Similarly, religion can be and often is instrumentalized to serve ideological and political ends that feed xenophobia, fear, and hatred instead of compassion and respect for human dignity.

This brings me to another reality that can be encountered across the world today: **polarization of societies and erosion of democratic structures**. This has an impact on churches as church members don’t live in vacuum but are impacted by these developments, carrying the polarization

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<sup>5</sup> According to the Global Religious Futures (GRF) project in 2022, 31 % of the world’s population will be Christian and 30 % Muslim in 2050: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/12/21/key-findings-from-the-global-religious-futures-project/>

<sup>6</sup> As of 2020, 57 countries have “very high” levels of government restrictions on religion, up from 40 in 2007, the baseline year of the study. These restrictions can take many forms, including efforts by governments to ban particular faiths, prohibit conversions, limit preaching or give preferential treatment to certain religious groups. The findings resonate with what we have been hearing from LWF member churches living as religious minorities in various contexts, especially in Asia.

also into the churches, raising the question how church communities can continue to come together despite the often-conflicting political views of their members. According to the World Economic Forum's *Global Risks Report* in 2024, the biggest global risk in two years' time is misinformation and disinformation, while societal polarization takes the third rank<sup>7</sup>. In an increasingly complex world, people tend to look for simple answers which leads to simplistic responses to complex problems, widely spread by social media platforms. There is increasingly less willingness to listen to each other and carefully analyze the root causes of the current problems. Around the globe, we also continue to see the strengthening of authoritarian and populist regimes. They undermine the democratic foundation of human rights and international law that provide legal mechanisms for safeguarding human dignity and paths to find peaceful solutions to conflicts.

From the Global South, one hears criticism towards the Global North not so much when it comes to the actual principles of human rights that the Western democracies have stood for but rather at the hypocritical way in which they are being applied (or not!) by the latter. Populist and authoritarian developments also tend to question women's rights, reverting to old stereotypes and thereby reinforcing and "protecting" so-called traditional values. Polarization and authoritarianism are fed by fear. In 1 John 4:18 we read that "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear". Unfortunately, fear can also cast out love towards God and one's neighbour which is the reason why we as Christians need to be particularly alert towards fear-sowing messages. At the LWF, we use the notion of 'misleading theologies' to describe the tendencies where law and fear govern theology rather than Jesus Christ and his liberating message of God's grace.

A Kenyan proverb says, "Treat the Earth well: it was not given to you by your parents, it was loaned to you by your children." This proverb is a good reminder of the far-reaching consequences of **climate emergency** (to use the language of the Thirteenth LWF Assembly), but also of the responsibility of the current decision-making generation, that is, those in positions of power today, vis-à-vis the future generations. In ten years' time, the four first global risks (out of 10) are all related to climate emergency: from extreme weather events and critical change to Earth systems to biodiversity loss and natural resources shortages<sup>8</sup>. Many LWF member churches are struggling with the immediate effects of climate change. We must respond to the climate emergency

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2024/digest/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2024/digest/>.

immediately in practical terms and also theologically. What do I mean? I believe that we are called to engage in a deep Trinitarian theology that recognizes the interconnectedness of creation, humanity, salvation, and church. Further, the LWF's approach to the climate emergency is framed in the context of holistic mission which implies continually reminding the world that the climate emergency is also a justice issue since those who suffer the most from human-made climate change are those who have contributed the least to it.

Climate change together with difficult economic situations and exploitation in many countries will continue to contribute to the **increased numbers of displaced people and to forced migration** which will again express itself in **increased number of wars and conflicts**. Already in 2004, the LWF identified migration as a central challenge for the church: "A new challenge for the church in mission [...] is to address the religious and cultural plurality in its midst. Large-scale migration of people [...] has led to an ever-larger diversity of religion and cultures in the major cities of the world."<sup>9</sup> Much of the migration is caused by wars and conflicts. The year 2023 was one of the most conflict-ridden since the end of World War II with altogether more than 100 million people forcibly displaced. The war in Gaza began in October 2023; the war in Ukraine has continued; in Sudan, around 8.4 million people are internally displaced – the highest number recorded in the year; the conflicts in Ethiopia and Myanmar are ongoing. At the same time, funding of humanitarian aid organisations which offer relief in the actual conflict regions, is diminishing, and in some countries their work is made increasingly difficult. For instance in Myanmar we, as LWF, were recently forced to close our World Service country program due to the current political situation, while hoping that we can be back and support the local population as soon as possible. Many conflicts have been forgotten, depending on the media interest towards the respective conflict.

Finally, the current developments in **digital technology**, particularly Artificial Intelligence (AI), bring the ongoing digital revolution to a new level with still unforeseeable consequences for anthropology: who and what is human, how does consciousness work? It also brings the concerns and dangers about fake news and misinformation to an entirely new level. Churches are challenged *and* invited to offer their contribution to the ongoing discussion, remembering the key features of

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<sup>9</sup> *Mission in Context. Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment. An LWF contribution to the understanding and practice of mission*, Geneva 2004, p. 19.

what it means to be human and how the faith understands God as the “ground of being” to use Paul Tillich’s vocabulary.

### **The role of the church in the public space in the face of today’s challenges**

Looking at the many challenges in the world, one may sometimes feel a bit hopeless or paralyzed, while others are busy in developing apocalyptic or utopic scenarios. Yet, as Lutherans, we know by heart the famous saying, attributed to Martin Luther (though he probably never said it, content-wise he absolutely could have): “Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree”.

However, times of crisis also have an immense potential. They can be more strongly rooted in God’s mission and demonstrate even more clearly solidarity and unity in the face of difficulties. What connects us – as Christians and as human beings – across diverse contexts is not only the ongoing crises. We are connected in faith with our sisters and brothers in Christ and therefore also connected with all human beings, be they Christian or not, for we recognize that every person has been created in the image of God. This connectedness, finally, extends and joins us with the whole living creation.

**The church’s mission today is to give witness of God’s love and compassion for God’s creation and to the interconnectedness of everything that lives.** Let me quote my fellow countryman, Estonian composer Arvo Pärt, an Orthodox Christian whose wish is to express with his music the idea of the unity of humankind: “Humanity forms a single, unified organism, and our existence is intrinsically linked to all other living beings. The essence of life lies in relationships, which should be embraced as our guiding principle and understood as the very capacity to love.”

God calls us to unity. At the same time, it cannot be emphasized enough that unity does not mean and *cannot be equated with* uniformity. In the Christian perspective, unity never means uniformity, just as God’s call for “all to be one” never means imposing unity. However, human beings tend to impose uniformity through the systems they create. When “unity” is confused with “uniformity”, neighbors are forced to give up their unique gifts and conform to a dominant group. Unity is always a *gift* from God.

Some decades ago, the LWF, in discussion with other Christian World Communions, developed a model for unity: unity in reconciled diversity. First and foremost, it applies to member churches and how we relate as diverse Christian communities in communion, but it also guides LWF's ecumenical efforts. But it is even broader. As God is the Creator of the whole cosmos, we as Christians are called to care and to show compassion for those who are not Christians. In today's context where there are many forces at work that aim at destruction and fragmentation by imposing a fake uniformity, **the task of the church is to gather people in their variety, to bring them together regardless of their background, social status, age or gender.**

The original meaning of the Greek word *ekklēsia*, “gathering of those summoned” refers to bringing people together and not to excluding them<sup>10</sup>. Gathering people around Jesus Christ helps us to draw closer to each other, while we draw closer to him. In view of the church's role in the public space, this means that based on the conviction that God loves and cares for the whole creation, **the church should support those public initiatives that aim at strengthening dialogue and not polarized dispute; at protecting human dignity and showing solidarity, not sowing fear and conspiracy theories. The Church should be contributing to reconciliation, not to division, while standing clearly against injustice as there can be no lasting peace without justice**<sup>11</sup>. The church's activity and engagement with and in the public space clearly link to *diakonia* (serving the neighbor) and *martyria* (public witness, advocacy) as aspects of its participation in God's holistic mission. Although *kerygma* (proclamation) doesn't seem to be, in some contexts, the immediate association for church's engagement in the public space, I would argue that we should always be ready “to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15). Why? The church sides always with the oppressed, with those who are neglected, with those who suffer under injustice, because Jesus himself did so. The way how the kerygma part of the holistic mission is (and can be) implemented in interaction with public space, depends a lot on the context. What is true for all contexts though is that we need to be ready to explain our hope and therefore vision as it grows out of faith; we

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<sup>10</sup> See Dietrich Bonhoeffer's explanation of *ekklēsia*: "ek-klesia, – assembly or gathering of “those who are called forth, not regarding ourselves from a religious point of view as specially favored, but rather as belonging wholly to the world”, Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 1997, 280-281.

<sup>11</sup> The war in Ukraine has initiated many discussions in churches about the legitimacy of war. The connection between peace and justice as well as Lutheran distinction between the worldly and spiritual realms may give us some guidance when talking about this difficult topic.



need to be ready to explain the core of Christian convictions using symbols and images that speak to people – just as Jesus could brilliantly use parables that spoke to both the fishermen and to the educated in his time. We need to live in solidarity with people.

Today, when different viewpoints are growing further apart within societies, we as Christians must aim at working together, modeling an obedience to the Gospel, that calls us beyond our individual opinions. However, working towards a common goal means being ready to live and talk with those who have different views than our own. For sure, this is often easier said than done. Joseph Liechty, a Mennonite peace builder who worked for many years in Northern Ireland, once told me a story about Alistair, a former member of a Protestant paramilitary group who had spent 13 years in prison for killings organized by his group. Later Alistair became a peace builder himself and when he was asked to define what peace building and reconciliation is, one of his responses was rather obscure at first glance: “Reconciliation is when you go to a meeting with your enemies, nothing goes right, and you leave angrier than when you came. This is reconciliation”, he said, “because six months earlier you would never have consented to be in the same room as those people.”

It is crucial to create “meeting spaces” as in many parts of the world there is less and less physical spaces where people, from different walks of life, can encounter each other, which only ends in demonization of the “other”, of those with different background or different views. Such “meeting spaces” witness to a profound reliance on unity as God’s gifts as opposed to humanly-imposed uniformity. In societies where churches are free to live their faith, the church is called to contribute to creating spaces for encounters in the public space, without thereby hiding or compromising its faith identity. **Church should be active in the public space, as escapism is not inline with the good news of the Gospel, as the Gospel needs to be spoken *in* the world, in the time we live in.** In addition, **the church must not be indifferent.** Marian Turski, an Auschwitz survivor who spoke at the Thirteenth Assembly in Krakow, has even called it the eleventh commandment<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> At the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, Marian Turski said in his speech: “Thou shalt not be indifferent when you see historical lies. Thou shalt not be indifferent when the past is distorted for today’s political needs. Thou shalt not be indifferent when any minority is discriminated against. Democracy hinges on the rights of minorities being protected. Thou shalt not be indifferent when any government infringes on the existing social contract. Be faithful to this commandment, the Eleventh Commandment: thou shalt not be indifferent. Because if you are indifferent, you will not even notice when another Auschwitz descends from the sky, falls upon the heads of you and your descendants”, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2020/01/28/do-not-be-indifferent-the-most-powerful-and-political-moments-from-auschwitz-commemoration/>.

When trust in political actors and various national and global organisations and platforms is shrinking, the church has good potential and even an obligation to participate in the public life through sharing the message of dialogue, peace building, and solidarity, as it grows out of good soil of the faith in Jesus Christ. Political parties and particularly the politicians come and go, but churches continue to serve throughout the times of different governments and coalitions. In places where it is difficult for Christians to witness publicly and to participate in the public life<sup>13</sup> or where the church is a tiny minority, the church itself can offer possibilities to be an “alternative society” where one is listened to, where justice is practiced and where women and youth are not “second class citizens” but can fully participate. A good example is our member church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land which is comprised of only few thousand members and introduced about a decade ago a new family law which in their context also serves as civil law for members of the Lutheran community. Contrary to the previous practice, daughters are now allowed to inherit on equal basis with sons which is still not the case among most religious communities in Palestine. This is a good example how a church can exercise countercultural practice, introducing gender justice through their own legislation.

When talking about the main principles for the church’s voice and engagement in the public space, there are two aspects that emerge from Lutheran theology that I would like to highlight before I come to my next point on the authenticity of the church’s witness.

First: it has been the strength of Lutheran tradition that in our relationship to God and one another (*coram Deo/coram mundo*), Lutherans take human brokenness seriously and at the same time claim the primacy of God’s grace and love towards human beings. It helps to avoid the two trenches: utopias and cynicism. History knows of a few utopias where the brokenness of human nature wasn’t taken seriously, and the attempts to implement these political utopias have been rather devastating. This is true about communism that was underwritten by a philosophy of historical materialism. The attempt to implement it in a forced manner (uniformity not unity) cost

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<sup>13</sup> Some churches within our communion live under oppression. Church leaders from the LWF Asia region pointed to this reality: “Restrictive government policies limit freedom of speech, increase oppression, and attempt to eliminate opposing voices who raise legitimate concerns affecting society. These policies and pressure from radical groups prevent us from living our faith freely, and violate human rights. [...] The spaces to publicly discuss these concerns are severely limited and can be sensitive with implications for the safety and security of the citizens of some countries and areas in which we live and serve”: Message of the LWF Asia Pre-Assembly 2023, online: <https://2023.lwfassembly.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/20230821%20-%20Exhibit%205.2%20Messages%20of%20LWF%20Pre-Assemblies%20-%20EN.pdf>.

the lives of tens of millions of people in many parts of the world, particularly in Eastern Europe and in Asia. At the same time, the liberal political economy and certain kind of Protestant work ethic that underwrote capitalism, an ideology of a different kind, had a devastating impact in many parts of the world where a lack of grace turned the idea of free-market competition into an instrument of colonialism and multi-dimensional violence. This was an example of a cynical attitude towards other human beings and human nature.

Secondly: Lutheran distinction between the two realms – the spiritual and the worldly – has had an enormous effect on the self-understanding of Lutheran churches and on their understanding of their public mission. It has been at times misused to argue for church's passivity in the matters of public space. However, today, particularly in societies where through participating in electoral processes one is actually participating in the decision-making of the "worldly realm", one cannot conveniently hide behind this distinction. We belong to the church, and we belong to our families, cultures, and communities. We participate in the decision-making processes of countries where we are citizens. We belong to the spiritual realm and to the worldly realm, believing that "no aspect of reality is outside the grasp of God's commitment to this world and no aspect of reality [is] outside God's reach"<sup>14</sup>. But the distinction of the two realms still remains helpful, both in view of the previous point – taking the human condition seriously – as well as in regard to the tasks of the church that follow from this distinction: 1) advocating against politicization of religion and "religionization" of politics; 2) safeguarding the distinction between state institutions and religion; 3) observing the political sphere closely, involving ourselves where necessary by drawing on our understanding of God's justice and grace as a tangible social reality; 4) affirming the public space as a shared space where the churches live together with people of other faiths and convictions<sup>15</sup>.

Now to my next point as promised...

I would like to highlight the need for the **authenticity of the church's witness**. As mentioned earlier, one of the reasons why international mechanisms and human rights are being questioned by some is the hypocritical way in which they have at times been handled by Western democracies. The reason why many churches, first and foremost in the Global North, have lost a number of members over the past decades, is the fact that churches haven't always managed to walk the talk.

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<sup>14</sup> *The Church in the Public Space* (2016/2021), LWF 2016, p. 20.

<sup>15</sup> *The Church in the Public Space* (2016/2021), pp. 21-22.

We cannot preach one thing and do another. In 1 John 3:18 we read, “let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth”. What is more, where we fail, we need to acknowledge this.

“Forgive us our trespasses” is today’s theme. This prayer should encourage churches to look into a mirror and to ask themselves where they might have missed the mark, where they might have gone wandering around in the landscape, landing at a wrong place or simply conforming to the landscape. This prayer enables us to recognize our failures and where needed to be brave enough to repent and turn around. This ability or gift is a culture that is increasingly lost in our world today – the willingness to accept one’s own limitations and failures yet it can be a very liberating and encouraging example for many in the world that is becoming increasingly merciless.

When talking about the authenticity of the witness, I think about actual solidarity with those who are oppressed or suffer under injustices; I think about actually going to places that are dangerous; I think about meeting with people whom we’d rather like to avoid as they don’t share our worldview, religion or background. Jesus did not gather all his followers by sitting in his comfort zone, neither did Paul. They both sought encounters on the margins. The first European Christian whom we know by name, Lydia, became Christian only because Paul was willing to speak to the women gathered by the river in Philippi (Acts 16:11-15) – at a place where he had hoped to find a Jewish prayer place and meet some respectable local men to whom to preach the gospel.

I am grateful that the LWF communion consists of many member churches who engage in such authentic witness. I am grateful that at the LWF as an organization, member church relations, public theology, ecumenical work, leadership development, diakonia and humanitarian work are present within the same communion. This fact, together with the principle that there is no church so big and so rich that it couldn’t learn anything from others, and no church so small and scarce in resources that it wouldn’t have gifts to share with others, helps to identify how to live out the holistic mission in the public space.

Allow me to share some examples. For many years European churches have been involved in the conviviality project which, particularly in Central Eastern Europe, which has led to integration initiatives for newly arrived refugees and migrants. Several churches didn’t only talk about welcoming refugees but actually took a major effort to help them integrate. Since the beginning of the war against Ukraine, many worship services in our member church in Poland are attended by Ukrainian refugees because they received shelter either in the church facilities or in congregants’

homes. Last November I visited our small member church in Honduras which is one of those churches whose witness goes far beyond its numeric size, and the LWF World Service Central America program. The church serves people in far remote areas, whereas the WS program supports the returnee migrants who are sent back from Mexican and US borders. During my visit, the seed capital for starting their own small businesses was distributed to the young returnees who often come back traumatized. One of them said: “When I first heard about this program, I didn’t believe it was true. Who on earth would offer us anything like this without wanting something in return?” Besides the seed capital, each of these young people received as a present a small LWF assembly cross, symbolizing the theme of the Assembly: “One Body. One Spirit. One Hope”, taken from Ephesians 4. I wish that this cross may be a symbol of hope for many of these young people.

### **Sharing hope: the church’s mission today**

I am convinced that one of the most important tasks for the church today is to share hope. To share hope that is neither naïve optimism nor simple belief in progress, but hope that is based on faith in Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord, who is already present here and now, comforting us, but also encouraging us to make a change. At the same time, as Christians, we are still waiting for the fulfillment of all things: we will always live in the tension of present and future eschatology, the *already-here-and-now* and *not-yet*.

“Hope” stands at the center of LWF strategy for 2025-2031. We are reminded of the need to plant seeds of hope today in ways that are credible, humble and courageous. The LWF Assembly message calls us to build communities of hope: “The Spirit calls us to be instruments of justice, peace and reconciliation, healing wounds within our churches and in our common world. Equipped by the Holy Spirit, we are encouraged to build communities of hope wherever the gospel is shared and lived across the globe<sup>16</sup>.

These communities of hope should not be inward-looking but aim at offering hope to all people living in this broken world. Tomáš Halík, a Czech Catholic priest who was ordained underground during the Communist era, reminded the LWF Assembly in Krakow of the need to recognize a sibling in every human being: “[The unity of the human family] is an eschatological goal, but in

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<sup>16</sup> *One Body, One Spirit, One Hope: Report of the Thirteenth Assembly*, 2024, pp. 12-13.

our time, we have an important step to take in here and now. It consists in recognizing and acknowledging – with all its implications – that all people are our siblings, that they have equal rights to recognition of their dignity, to our acceptance in respect, love, and solidarity”<sup>17</sup>.

May the hope that is within us abound, and may God’s love for all creation inspire us as we engage with the public space.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 71-72.