



THE
LUTHERAN
WORLD
FEDERATION

Office of the
General Secretary

lutheranworld.org

To: LWF Member churches

Geneva, 31 March 2020

Re: Church in times of Coronavirus. A Pastoral letter

Dear sisters, dear brothers in Christ,

We greet you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ!

COVID-19 continues to spread in the world. While in some of the earlier hotspots the pace seems to slow down, there are new countries and communities being exposed, with governments taking restrictive measures.

In our letter today, we want to take up some specific issues related to COVID-19 and the response of faith leaders and communities, with the hope that these may contribute toward ongoing discernment among LWF member churches and how they relate to each other in these times.

Physically gathering for worship

With great concern, we hear of Christian communities that insist on physically gathering for worship, even when restrictions have been put in place by authorities.

Sometimes, this defiance is based on the assumption that the virus only affects people from certain regions of the world. In other cases, the defiance is based on a theological narrative, according to which the blood of Christ has cleansed the lives of the believers, and therefore protects from the COVID-19.

We reiterate our call to LWF member churches to listen to health authorities and follow the measures that they are putting in place to contain the spread of the virus, even if this means refraining from gathering for worship in one place for a period of time.

We furthermore call member churches to teach diligently and to live out the gift of faith in humbleness and responsibility. The story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness (Mk 4) helps us understand that faith should never lead to testing and tempting God's power. Instead, faith in the Triune God empowers us to go through this time of trial with hope and with a loving heart towards those most vulnerable to COVID-19 and its consequences.

Apocalyptic prophecies and end-of time predictions

We also hear of voices who see in the current situation signs of the imminent end of time or the second coming of Christ. Certain theological tendencies interpret the global pandemic as a punishment of God, often singling out specific nationalities, or ethnic and other groups as the source of God's anger. This tendency has led already to hostilities and attacks. Expressions of xenophobia and the persecution of minorities are on the rise.

God doesn't speak through a virus. God speaks through Jesus Christ, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, living in our times through the work of the Holy Spirit. Let this continue to be the basis for the preaching and the teaching of the church.

We call upon LWF member churches to remain steadfast to the words of our Lord Jesus Christ spoken to his disciples: "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mt 24:36). Churches should not preach what they cannot possibly know, but they should preach the message they have received: the good news of Jesus Christ, Emmanuel (God with us), offered to humankind as a gift of salvation and freedom.

We furthermore call upon LWF member churches to oppose and reject any singling out of individuals or blaming groups as being responsible for COVID-19. This is a time to stand together and to support each other. The world does not need stigmatization and violence, it needs cooperation and solidarity.

Sacramental life in times of confinement

LWF member churches have a wide array of practices regarding the frequency of the celebration of Holy Communion in Sunday services. Among those churches that practice a weekly celebration of Holy Communion, the pain of isolation and the deprivation of receiving the body and the blood of Christ is strongly felt.

We are aware of the pastoral challenge resulting from this situation. It requires deep theological discernment, which needs to take into account pastoral, confessional and ecumenical dimensions.

We encourage dialogue between pastors and their bishops or presidents to *jointly* respond to these pastoral challenges, and at the same time do everything they can to halt the spread of the virus out of love for the neighbour.

The LWF Communion Office is developing background material for the Triduum, as well as sample liturgies, that you may consider using as resources during Holy Week. They offer local communities the possibility to experience a deeper sense of the global nature of the communion of Lutheran communion by jointly worshipping, while physically distant, and in many cases confined to their homes.

Not losing sight of the most vulnerable

We hear the stories of people in different parts of the world, who are advised to regularly wash their hands - but have no water. We hear the stories of people who are asked to stay in their homes - but whose daily subsistence is based on them being out in the streets and markets. We hear the stories of refugees, who are waiting already in overcrowded camps for a political solution to both the conflicts that push them out of their countries, and to their status as refugees. How will they be able to protect themselves? And how will women and children do, when confined to homes where violence is recurrent?

We invite member churches to accompany and support each other, as well as to support their shared diaconal ministry, the LWF World Service. The LWF Communion Office is seeking to address these new challenges resulting from the spread of the COVID-19. This unprecedented situation requires unprecedented and decisive action.

Because the virus is not contained by borders between countries, solidarity and cooperation must move across borders as well. We call upon LWF member churches not to lose sight of this global perspective, and to remember the many in the world who are in vulnerable situations. We invite churches to come together regionally and globally, to work together, to support each other and to share their resources.

Even behind locked doors

As we enter Holy Week, we wish to share a word of encouragement. On Easter Sunday, we will read the story of the risen Christ unexpectedly standing among his disciples, who were sitting in a room, behind locked doors because of fear. There he stood, in their midst!

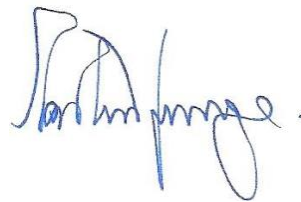
What a story to read and to ponder in these days. It is as if it was written for us today: locked in, sometimes sensing fear or anxiety, wondering what's next. And yet: visited! Met by the risen Lord, and called, as the disciples back then, to resume their faith journey as people called by the Lord as witnesses of love and compassion, of service, of freedom and liberation – in God's name.

We wish you all a blessed Holy Week!

Yours in Christ



Archbishop Dr Musa Pantil Filibus
LWF President



Rev. Dr Martin Junge
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