

ADDRESS OF THE LWF PRESIDENT: ABOUND IN HOPE

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. The Thirteenth Assembly: what it means to be churches in communion.....	2
3. A strategy with hope in focus.....	3
4. Meeting and learning from the member churches	4
Visit to Poland and Ukraine	5
Visit to The Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Norway	6
5. Conclusion: wishes for the Council.....	7

1. Introduction

- 1) Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, I greet you in the name of Jesus who calls us and sends us as his messengers, proclaiming the gospel, serving the whole person, sharing hope.
- 2) It is good to be together here in Chavannes, for the first full meeting of the Council. We are embarking upon a shared journey which will take us from the Thirteenth Assembly in Kraków, Poland, towards the Fourteenth LWF Assembly which will be held in 2030. The Council will decide on the venue at its meeting in 2025.
- 3) I am truly grateful to be here with you and I want to thank every one of you who are members of the Council for your willingness to represent your member church and serve as Council members. Similarly, I am grateful for the many who have come to this meeting as advisors, representing partners, and to the staff who have prepared this meeting. We have an important task ahead of us and I am glad you are here.
- 4) The theme of our Council meeting this year is “Abound in Hope.” It comes from Romans 15:13
- 5) **Hope is at the center of the new strategy for our communion 2025-2031.** Hope is one of the gifts we receive when we are baptized.
- 6) This hope is rooted in Christ and given to us by the Holy Spirit. And this hope empowers us to build welcoming and open communities that enable us to act together for a better world.
- 7) There is an abundance of crises in our world: *Crises related to climate*, because of draughts or floods and global warming. *Political and social crises* because of wars and conflicts that cause new geopolitical alliances and shift values. *Existential crises* in a world that seems to be accelerating even faster, where technology and multitasking lead to stress and isolation in the middle of online connectedness and an overflow of information.

- 8) During times of crises, it isn't natural to look for ways to interpret and understand what is taking place and for new ways of living together. In this respect our times resemble the times of the reformation. The 1520's and 2020's are similar. The reformation took place during a tumultuous time with big new discoveries and fundamental political, social, and cultural changes. This was fertile ground for eschatological speculations and new spiritual movements, for revolutions and reformations. For that reason, discerning the signs of hope was an acute question for Luther. He knew that the world is ambiguous and easy answers and false foundations all too often lead to unhealthy hierarchies and new spiritual bondage rather than liberation and communion. We also know this today.
- 9) Lutheran theology points us to the promise revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ. The theology of the cross is both crucial awareness of the abundant crises and a revelation of divine grace. The cross is the symbol of hope in that it promises God's act of transformation in a destructive and violent world. The darkest and most sinister realities can become places for revelation of divine grace. This is the root of our hope: While the world may be ambiguous, God's promise of forgiveness, healing, and restoration is clear.
- 10) Real hope can change the world. Hope has given rise to our Christian language, metaphors, and practices. Hope can transform climate depression into climate action. Hope can give us the courage to start dialogue towards peace during war and conflict. Hope is what makes life with each other possible for us. We need hope to form communities and work together for a better world.
- 11) This hope is what we bring as Christians to our common world. I was reminded of this when the LWF governance met Pope Francis three years ago and he said: "It is in times of change and crises the Holy Spirit has the best changes to rebuild our minds."
- 12) We are Christians in our daily life with each other, in our common world. In that sense, our Lutheran spirituality affects the world and is formed by the needs of our neighbor. As Luther said, following our vocation is also our daily worship.
- 13) Our hope is grounded outside of us and calls us to serve our neighbors, irrespective of their background. Here, the cross of Christ, our theology, our mission and our diakonia form our common Lutheran identity. One body, One spirit and One hope!

2. The Thirteenth Assembly: what it means to be churches in communion

- 14) Our last meeting took place immediately after the Thirteenth Assembly. I think that at the time we were quite caught up in the moment. Our minds full of impressions of the Assembly, of what it means to be churches in communion. I have been reflecting on what it means to come together as the Lutheran World Federation, representing 150 churches in 99 countries and more than 78 million people who are members in the churches.
- 15) There is such a rich and deep impact in what we share and experience at an Assembly. We come together in worship, rejoicing in the Lord and praying together. Singing songs in many languages. There is the fellowship of brothers and sisters, old and new friends and various discussions. Partners who teach us new things. It was unforgettable to go together to Auschwitz, where we faced a dark side of human history – The Holocaust.

- 16) The LWF placed a wreath with the words “Never again!” This visit will remain strong in our hearts and from the Assembly we went as messengers of peace and reconciliation, reminded by Marian Turski to never be indifferent.
- 17) We listened to so many inspiring talks and presentations and we learned about the local context and walked the streets of beautiful Krakow. But first and foremost, we came together as one expression of the unity and body of Christ. And it is one expression of our communion and our journey together, and our hope.
- 18) For me the Assembly was a strong affirmation of how there is strength in our collaboration and in our diversity. When we work together as a communion we find added value, we strive to put Christian faith into action through shared witness and respectful dialogue, through humanitarian and development work, diakonia and advocacy. And we must never forget that to be Lutheran has always been to be a believer in a specific context, witnessing in context, preaching in context. And because of that, there is great diversity in our communion. This is a sign on how God through his Son Jesus Christ is nurturing us as member churches – so that we are able to be truly relevant when we preach the gospel and serve the neighbor, in all of the different contexts of the member churches. At the same time, the gospel calls us to be critical of cultural practices and contextual realities that don't respect human dignity, serve egoistic interests and misuse power.
- 19) The Assembly in Krakow strongly confirmed the principle of unity in reconciled diversity. This is not a kind of unity that places homogeneity above freedom and diversity – something that particularly populist and authoritarian politicians tend to do. Because authoritarians have an inherent preference for oneness and sameness that is often described as unity; they favor obedience and conformity, value strong-handed leaders and social homogeneity over freedom and diversity. We know that authoritarian trends are on rise across the world. Karin Stenner, a sociologist, has shown that about one third of the population also in Western countries is predisposed to authoritarianism. Yet, we as churches coming from Lutheran tradition should offer a different understanding of unity. Because the unity we proclaim is unity in faith, in the Holy Spirit that liberates and creates loving bonds between human beings.
- 20) I spoke of this when I was elected president, and in the months since I have grown stronger in this conviction. We came together as one body, in one spirit, with one hope. And together, we discerned and reflected, and set a direction for the global communion. And that direction is centered on hope.

3. A strategy with hope in focus

- 21) The main topic of our Council meeting this year is the new LWF Strategy. It has been prepared well by the Communion Office, taking direction from the Assembly and seeking input from the member churches, key partners, and from you. It builds on the previous one but sharpens the approach.
- 22) The LWF Strategy is for the communion, it describes what the member churches aspire to do together as the Lutheran World Federation. This means it will guide the work of the communion office in the years to come and will be what we as the Council look to when we discuss the LWF's work at our annual meetings.
- 23) It is also meant to be inspiration for each member church and the member churches as they come together in the regions of the LWF. Every church should ask itself: where do we see ourselves in this

strategy? Where can it complement our own strategies, where do we want to contribute, offering our gifts, how do we want to strengthen the relations with the other member churches, in our region and across the globe? I hope that this can be discussed at the annual regional leadership meetings so that the new strategy will truly enhance communion relations.

- 24) The four strategic priorities or areas that express what the global communion is committed to are:
 1. Responsible Theology
 2. Thriving churches
 3. Justice and Peace
 4. Service and dignity
- 25) And how it wants to move forward.
- 26) And in the center is hope. That is why the title 'Sharing Hope' was chosen for this strategy. I think it is a good strategy that affirms ongoing work of the LWF and sharpens the focus so that we can be even more relevant, addressing some of the challenges of our times – **in words and deeds**, to make even more of an impact.
- 27) The LWF is a strategically led and managed organization. In practice this means that the strategy is in focus when the Communion Office prepares its long-term and annual workplans and that will be in focus when the Communion Office reports back to us as the Council. My hope is also that we will be able to focus in depth on the four strategic priorities during our Council meetings in the coming years, developing a deeper understanding of the work we do together as the global communion of Lutherans and the impact this work has locally and globally.
- 28) You have all seen the strategy and you have contributed to it. Later this week we will have a session to discuss and approve it. I am looking forward to that.

4. Meeting and learning from the member churches

- 29) I want to share with you some impressions from my first visits to member churches. In April I was invited to visit the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) and The Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY). In May I visited the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Poland and the German Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ukraine with the LWF General Secretary. During these two visits I had a chance to join in worship, learn about the work and context of these churches, their challenges and joys. I also had a chance to visit the LWF World Service country programs in Ethiopia and Ukraine.
- 30) Throughout the first trip, I was accompanied by Vice-President for Africa Rev. Dr Yonas Dibisa, who leads the Mekane Yesus church. The Ethiopian church in Ethiopia is the largest member church of the LWF with over 12 million members, and the church in Tanzania is the second largest with over 8 million members. Both are very vibrant and carry strong Christian testimonies. I was overwhelmed by the amazing hospitality I encountered. At the same time I was inspired by the churches' strengths and strong position in society. Common to both churches is their emphasis on holistic mission. In Tanzania we were hosted by Presiding bishop Dr Alex Malasusa. We visited the Tumaini Makumira University and Kilimanjaro Christian Health Center (KCMC), a modern hospital owned by the church that is developing rapidly. I had the honor of laying a foundation stone for their new six-floor laboratory. Makumira university educates both theologians and musicians. This also had personal

significance for me, because they have had a collaboration with the University of Copenhagen in Denmark for several years. Together with several of the church's bishops and leaders, we had a very inspiring and well-organized seminar on the development of renewable energy and climate-friendly initiatives.

- 31) In Ethiopia, we heard about the church's strategy for the development of Mekane Yesus Seminary, and we visited the university compound where, supported by LWF, both teaching and residential buildings were being constructed. We also met with ecumenical partners, including the Catholic Cardinal and the Orthodox Patriarch. We talked about the formation of a national council of churches to strengthen their social and diaconal efforts and the work advocacy for peace and reconciliation. The President of Ethiopia received us at her private residence and the country's Prime Minister received us at The Government Palace. For me, this showed the respect for the EECMY in Ethiopian society. The meetings were very fruitful.
- 32) Both of these churches are conscious about being sustainable in terms of economy as well as climate. The EECMY rents out parts of their buildings and thus earn money for e.g. theological education. They have set up their own pension company and their own bank, which also generates money for the church. This is forward-thinking and I am sure many of us could learn from this.
- 33) The two churches have a strong focus on theological education. They also have huge demands for more pastors and evangelists because they both are growing fast.
- 34) The vision of the church in Tanzania is "Serving the whole person" and this could be the headline for both churches' focus on service in both word and deed.
- 35) It was a great inspiration and encouragement to me. I want to thank the host churches and the LWF staff from the Communion Office who accompanied me.
- 36) Maybe we can think of this using the cross as an analogy. What we do is grounded in our faith, our relation to God, and in our spirituality. This can be seen as the vertical dimension of the cross. And our relation with God expresses itself in serving the whole person and in building a community where all can live in dignity, this is the horizontal dimension of the cross.

Visit to Poland and Ukraine

- 37) Again, it was impressive to see the holistic mission of the church in Poland with my own eyes. We also had the opportunity to thank Bishop Jerzy Samiec and the entire Lutheran Church for hosting the Krakow Assembly. I also had the pleasure of introducing the Danish Minister for Ecclesiastical Affairs to the work of the church in Poland and Ukraine.
- 38) In Ukraine we visited our member church and were accompanied by Bishop Pavlo Shvarts. Furthermore, we visited the LWF World Service country program.
- 39) Again, I was impressed by the strength and visibility of the church and good relations in the community. The church and Bishop Shvarts have been an invaluable help to LWF in starting up our country program to help here after Russia's attack on the country.
- 40) We saw the impressive work the country program is doing in the city of Kharkiv, which we visited during a very difficult time. LWF has rebuilt 500 apartments and is building classrooms for 200

students in an old nuclear shelter, so children can be safe at school. LWF is also distributing relief items to evacuees from the war zones. We met with head of the presidential office Andriy Yermak and the mayor of Kharkiv. Yermak thanked LWF for the great work we have done in the country and expressed his hope for a good outcome of the upcoming peace conference organized by the Swiss government.

- 41) We met the mayor of Kharkiv who thanked the LWF for its help and support. He said many people are willing help, but not as many actually come and show us solidarity in these difficult times. While we were there, we heard air raid sirens all the time. That's how it is in Kharkiv.
- 42) We also visited the congregation in Kharkiv where the children and youth choir sang for us. A touching experience.
- 43) What stands out for me is this: LWF makes a difference in a very real and tangible way. In Ukraine we saw a great example of how local churches and World Service work together to perform what I would call miracles.
- 44) We have also seen how our prayers and practical work can turn hopelessness into hope, even in very dangerous situations. And always keep in mind: This is never about the size of a church. It is about on the strength and impact of its witness.
- 45) Again, let me thank both churches and to the staff from the Communion Office for the well-organized visits.

Visit to The Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Norway

- 46) In Norway, we celebrated the first Christian legislation given by King Olav II in 1024. In this legislation, Christian values are highlighted in particular by emphasizing that people are created by God in his image as equals. The rights of children, women and slaves were emphasized by this law, and the rights of newborn children protected.
- 47) I was invited to participate in a panel discussion about the place of Christian values in the world today and to speak about how we as LWF can help our member churches in relation to human rights - religious freedom and equal rights for women and men. An exciting anniversary where the leaders of state and government also participated.
- 48) I will have more chances to meet with member churches in the coming months and I will go with open ears and open eyes to see and to learn. One affirmation so far is the importance of standing together, being close to one another as a communion of churches and of being open to learn and to share.
- 49) Here let me specifically highlight the Communion Solidarity Fund which the LWF launched in 2022. As you read in the report of the General Secretary, the fund has already shown its value in providing support to churches in need. And what an expression of solidarity this is, that when disaster strikes, sister churches in the global Lutheran communion can provide quick and immediate support. I want to thank all who have contributed to the fund and at the same time encourage the member churches to continue giving to that fund and through that ensure that the LWF can quickly provide support when needed.

- 50) In our current times, when human rights, democratic structures and rule of law are under pressure and diminishing in many parts of the world, it is increasingly important that churches continue to raise their voices in the public space. Escapism from the public space is not in line with the good news of the gospel, because the gospel needs to be spoken in the world, addressing this time we live in. As our Assembly speaker Tomas Halik has said; “Truth, freedom and love are mutually conditional.”

5. Conclusion: wishes for the Council

- 51) In conclusion let me express a simple wish for our upcoming Council meeting: I hope for informing and encouraging conversations during the Council. This is the beginning of our journey and what we decide in the coming days will be important for the upcoming period in the life of the LWF.