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Message to the member churches on Being churches of hope - resisting forces of exclusionary populism

The LWF Council, meeting in Geneva, Switzerland from 27 June to 2 July, 2018, under the theme “freely you have received, freely give” (Matthew 10:8), deliberated and adopted the following message to the LWF member churches:

Being churches of hope - resisting forces of exclusionary populism

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:2)

- (1) LWF member churches in different societies struggle with the effects of rising populism. While populist movements often claim that they aim at protecting the interest of the people, they frequently contribute to increasing fear and exclusion in society. The space for sincere deliberation on issues of public concern is shrinking. Hate speech and post-truth propaganda undermines basic trust within society which is a precondition for democracy. Fear can lead to resignation and withdrawal from engagement in civil society, enmity and exclusion of others. In some cases, populist movements with an ethno-nationalist agenda even claim to defend the Christian faith against “others”.
- (2) The LWF Council is deeply concerned about these developments. We are worried about the destructive effects on people’s lives and on the political processes. We are appalled that some movements distort the gospel, and instrumentalise Christian identity for their own purposes.
- (3) When we see people bound by fear, we lift up the message of Christ. It is a message of hope that drives out fear; a message of compassion that challenges

indifference; a message of justice that resists oppression; a message of reconciliation that holds fast to peace-building. This good news is desperately needed today. Jesus Christ stood with those who—often in God’s name—were being crushed by the prevailing religious–political alliance of his time. He confronted a status quo that was based on exclusion and oppressive violence and pointed at the in-breaking reign of God as the horizon against which to assess present realities. Jesus’ call to conversion is a call to transform an unjust status quo, and to begin aligning to the future that God promises.

- (4) The LWF Council encourages its member churches, including their related theological institutions:
- (5) To discern current dynamics in the world and churches through prayer and theological analysis. There are different, sometimes conflicting perspectives within the church, therefore it is important that churches create spaces where these perspectives can be in sincere dialogue to deepen discernment. The churches are called to critically remember where church and theology have been complicit in ethno-nationalist populist agendas and point to the need for repentance.
- (6) To engage in society by radiating the hope that Christ instills in us and the compassion into which Christ calls us. In the face of distorted political processes and unjust economic systems the churches uphold human dignity and promote justice and peace, rule of law and respect for diversity. Such engagement will gain momentum when it is carried out together with ecumenical, interfaith and other civil society partners. The churches are called to build bridges of mutual trust and collaboration. As a global communion of churches, we know that we are a people, embodied in a diversity of ethnicities, cultures, genders, races and languages in majority and minority contexts around the world.
- (7) to resist oppressive and exclusionary systems and structures and to transform our communities into non-violent spaces of full, just and safe participation for all. The origin of the church’s reflection, action, and being is Christ. Christ points to the “least of all” who are excluded from community. The churches need to actively contribute to debates in society where perverted narratives about Christianity are being used and to emphasize that the Christian “values” are those of love, compassion and solidarity.
- (8) In order to break the vicious cycle of fear, hate and enmity we, as the LWF Council, call for dialogue and exchange within and between churches. To overcome the forces of ethno-nationalist populism, we call for churches to discern, engage and resist, based on the faith, love and hope to which Christ has called us.