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MESSAGE FROM THE 2019 ASIA LUTHERAN IDENTITY SEMINAR

The Holy Spirit and Our Lutheran Identity

Preamble

We, the 29 participants including students from the Lutheran Theological Seminary, from 8 Asian countries and representing 20 member churches, met from 2-6 May 2019 in Hong Kong, for the Asia Lutheran Identity Seminar. This seminar continues a multi-year process of studying Lutheran Identity in the Asia region. Gathered under the theme “The Holy Spirit and our Lutheran Identity,” we engaged in theological presentations, case studies and contextual reflection on two topics, namely, “Holy Spirit as Gift and Promise: the Spirit calls us in Word and Baptism” and “Freed and Formed: Spiritual Gifts and Vocation of the Priesthood of All Believers.” The primary objectives of this event were to respond to the ministry priorities in Asia, as named during in the 2017 Asian Church Leaders Conference, and to prepare for the 2019 LWF Global Consultation on Lutheran Identity. This seminar explored how the Person and work of the Holy Spirit forms our Lutheran identity.

Contextual issues

Within our religiously and culturally diverse region, we acknowledge that it is difficult to provide one common answer to the question, “What is Lutheran identity?” A plurality of faiths and traditional cultures influence the way that LWF member churches in Asia express their Lutheran identity. Some member churches have roots in the Reformed tradition, and do not carry the description “Lutheran” in their name, while some others face difficulties articulating Lutheran identity in the course of daily life and ministry. We suggest it may be appropriate to talk about “Lutheran identities,” in order to emphasize diversity in unity, instead of uniformity.

Cultural and denominational hybridity among our membership influences the reception of practices associated to spiritual gifts. Particularly, there is confusion and fear within some member churches related to the practice of certain spiritual gifts in our context. Our churches need to remain alert to discourses that commodify spiritual gifts or interpret them as evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit. We further identified the practice of teaching or demanding the expression of particular spiritual gifts as evidence of salvation as particularly abusive. Our churches face significant challenges in responding to the pastoral needs created by these common teachings about the Holy Spirit. We are not clear how, or to what extent spiritual gifts should be incorporated into worship and ministry.

In light of these issues, our member churches struggle to describe the person and work of the Holy Spirit in the theology, liturgy, preaching, ministry and mission of the church, and the vocation of our members. We stress the need to reinforce the distinctive marks of our Lutheran identity as a way to build up the body, and faithfully reform the member churches according to the work and mission of the Holy Trinity.

Preparation for the 2019 Global Consultation on Lutheran Identity

We used the content of this seminar to prepare a set of questions that will be presented at the 2019 Global Consultation on Lutheran Identity. This significant contextual contribution from the Asia region will form and shape the qualitative research of the upcoming global study process. The questions are attached to this message.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In light of the rich discussions and contextual analysis, ALIS 2019 presents the following conclusions and recommendations.

1. We need to maintain a Trinitarian understanding of the Person and work of the Holy Spirit, and situate discourse about spiritual gifts within that framework. This framework prevents confusion regarding spiritual gifts, ministry and the means of grace, and helps to maintain good order within the member churches. It will also help to ensure that our member churches do not only react to challenges, but constructively narrate our Lutheran identity within their contexts.
2. Lutheran churches point their members to the distinctive theological and confessional bases of being *Lutheran*. In our opinion, there is a need to connect the concept of sanctification to the doctrine of justification by grace through faith, the proclamation of the Word as promise and the administration of the sacraments as gift. The Bible speaks about spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12-14). We further affirm that spiritual gifts exist for the sake of ministry and edification of the church. In this way, member churches can maintain the connection between grace (*charis*) and gifts (*charismata*).
3. The catechism and other confessional writings are instruments for teaching a holistic understanding of Lutheran identity that connects the promise and gift received in baptism with Christian vocation as the priesthood of all believers. Spiritual gifts are distinct from human ability or individual capacities, and neither merit salvation. A particular gift should be used to honour God alone. The full range of spiritual gifts should work together in harmony to build up the community in faith, hope and love.
4. Relating our theology of the Spirit to our Lutheran identity reflects the unity of the Trinity, and focuses ministry and worship on what God is doing. This unity reminds us that God speaks to our hearts when we proclaim the Gospel and administer the sacraments. A holistic understanding of Lutheran identity motivates us to consider the dynamism for our worship, mission, and proclamation in word and works (*diakonia*). Spiritual gifts can be incorporated into parish ministries. But we also acknowledge that certain gifts may cause confusion within the body of Christ and hence, member churches should develop guidelines for the

responsible application of spiritual gifts. Until then, individual cases must be handled pastorally.

5. Recognizing that charismatic movements are not monolithic, ALIS calls on churches to engage in constructive, local dialogue. Member churches and seminaries should explore the connection between pneumatology and spiritual theology. They should ensure that curricula address issues such as spiritual gifts within a Trinitarian framework, so that church leaders can effectively teach and lead their parish in matters of worship, Christian education and formation.

These are some conclusions that emerged during the seminar. Our conclusions call member churches to respond to challenges that we recognize are global in scope. We have hope, knowing the Lutheran churches in Asia respond as part of a global communion, with a shared identity rooted in the promise that we receive from one Lord, one faith and one baptism. In this common Lutheran confession, we affirm that the LWF Communion can help us in the continuation of our discussion on Lutheran identities, united in the common confession that we believe in the Triune God.