

**Report of the First Meeting of the Working Group
Understanding the Gift of Communion – The Quest for a Shared Self-Understanding of
the Lutheran Communion**

Introduction

The fellowship of churches as communion has been given to us as a gift. The Lutheran World Federation has committed itself to the task of ongoing conversation and deepening realization of communion. As a gift the communion is something we receive. As a task it is something towards which we commit ourselves to labor. Previous LWF studies have already explored the Christological, ecclesiological and spiritual dimensions of LWF as communion. Still, we remain in the process of actualizing the communion to the full in the life and internal relationships between LWF member churches.

As societies undergo transformations, many cultural and social realities challenge theological affirmations and ethical paradigms familiar to us. In discerning God's call churches make choices responding to their socio-political and cultural realities. These socio-political and cultural realities challenge churches to be faithful both in their biblical interpretation and in their lived experience of their context. Behind every contentious issue lies the tension between the common confession of faith and the call to give an authentic and responsible response to the present context. So we have to ask: How can the churches make decisions concerning ecclesial or pastoral issues (also called "socio-ethical issues") important for their own missional context, without contradicting our common faith and the gift of communion? How far is disagreement regarding various ethical questions acceptable as a manifestation of "reconciled diversity"? One of the main tasks of the communion is to discern together the criteria of the commitment and mutual accountability between the churches. Another issue is the need of clarity on how LWF member churches live in communion with one another and in their bilateral and multilateral relationships.

The Task

The LWF Council meeting in 2013 asked the General Secretary "to engage member churches in further theological reflections on how to respect the autonomy of LWF member churches' decisions and express and deal with the resulting differences, while at the same time upholding their commitment to live and work together as a communion of churches." The Council commended the document "Claiming the gift of communion in the fragmented world", a reflection by the General Secretary in preparation for the LWF Council meeting in 2013.

In order to begin this joint reflection process, a working group of seven persons representing different regions and expertise was appointed by the Meeting of Officers at the end of 2013. The members of this group are: Prof. Dr Guillermo Hansen (Argentina), Dr Minna Hietamäki (Finland), Dr Allen Jorgenson (Canada), Bishop em. Dr Hance Mwakabana (Tanzania), Prof. Dr En Yu Thu (Malaysia), Prof. Dr Elisabeth Parmentier (France) and Dr Annika Laats (Estonia). Rev. Dr Kaisamari Hintikka, Dr Kenneth Mtata, Dr Simone Sinn and Dr Patricia Cuyatti of the LWF communion office staff accompanied the process. ..

The working group was given the task to prepare a study document "On the Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion" to be presented to the Council and for the use of the member

churches. The study document would aim to further clarify the self-understanding of LWF as a communion and to respond to the challenges of disagreements between member churches within the communion. The study document is to be informed by the LWF's constitutional provisions on the communion and by relevant theological documents about communion. The study document should also provide new insights that can be helpful for the future. The working group held its first meeting from 18 to 21 March 2014 in Bossey, Switzerland

The First Meeting of the Working Group

At the first meeting of the Working Group the General Secretary Martin Junge gave an introduction to "The context of the current quest for a shared self-understanding of the Lutheran Communion". In his introductory remarks the General Secretary emphasized the challenge of so-called "socio-ethical" decisions that also have potential for dividing the churches. A faithful response to this challenge is critical since it will signal "the ways how the LWF intends in future to deal with difference, particularly if this difference is felt and understood to be of profound nature." He pointed out that difference was "not over and against unity". Furthermore, he noted that "I think it is time for the LWF to develop ways to express disagreement that does not resort to the severing of ties as the apparently only available option. I believe that the apostolic tradition of mutual consolation, accompaniment and admonishment has a lot to offer in this regard. The concept of unity in reconciled diversity, that builds so strongly on Lutheran theological thinking, is an additional building block that the LWF communion is particularly well placed to connect with such a possible process of expressing disagreement".

The first part of the meeting consisted of presentations of the members of the working group and an external speaker. Each member had been asked to prepare a presentation about a topic touching the current challenges put to the communion. Dr. Allen Jorgenson presented "Perspectives from Lutheran confessional writings and other writings"; Dr Minna Hietamäki explained the "Understanding of ecclesial communion in documents from LWF ecumenical dialogues"; Rev. Dr. Kenneth Mtata was invited to bring "Biblical insights on Heterogeneity, Homogeneity and Communion"; Bishop em. Dr. Hance Mwakabana asked "What does autonomy and accountability mean in the relationships between churches?"; Prof. Dr En Yu Thu reflected about "Self-understanding of the Lutheran communion in a plural society of Asia", Prof. Dr Elisabeth Parmentier focused on "Dealing with difference in communion relationships"; Dr Guillermo Hansen dealt with "The church, churches and power. How do we read contemporary dynamics from a post-colonial perspective?"; Dr Luk Van Langenhove, Director of the United Nations University Institute on comparative regional integrative studies in Bruges, was invited as an external speaker to give a presentation on "Secular multilateral and regional systems: Organizational structures across contexts". These presentations are presented as background material and they will be available on the website during the eighteen months' process of the preparation of the study document.

In the second part of the meeting, the group worked together on the main elements of the study draft. The group decided to structure the draft according to the tension that exists between two affirmations: the communion that unites us is first and foremost a *gift*, and the richness of this gift leads us to *the task* of sharing our mutual commitment in a way that is responsible towards

the world that God loves.¹ Both the gift and the task exist simultaneously; the church as communion is already given to us as we are called to embody this communion. Some of the initial thoughts on the nature and content of the proposed study document are described in the latter part of this report.

The Process

The finished study document is planned to be ready by the Council meeting 2015. The Council will receive a *Report of the First meeting of the Working Group* including a first draft proposal describing the nature and content of the proposed study document for its approval at the Council meeting 2014. If the report is received, the working group will continue to work independently with scheduled virtual meetings during fall 2014. The group will have a second face-to-face meeting to revise and finalize a draft text in March 2015. The draft will be ready in time to be presented to the Council meeting in June 2015 and, if approved, ready for publication and distribution to the member churches by October 2015. During the drafting process the regions will have had the opportunity to engage in conversation on the understanding of communion in various leadership meetings during 2014 and 2015.

¹ This is also the way the LWF Strategy-Document “With passion for the church and for the world” speaks: “Communion is a gift, before it is a task”, p.8-9, 2011.

Proposed Outline of the Study Document

Part I: Aspects of Communion

The first part of the proposed document discusses the understanding of the Church as communion as it has developed within the churches of the Lutheran World Federation. This section takes stock of already existing materials. Emphasis is on the nature of communion existing in diversity and the mechanisms of recognition and reconciliation in upholding the communion.

The Church's fellowship is understood as a *koinonia* reflecting the diversity of the Triune God. The Church receives its communion as a gracious gift and realizes it in the midst of diversity. Lutheran churches have been drawn together into a fellowship that has gradually been developing from a federation towards a communion. The crucial steps toward the Lutheran World Federation as a communion of churches were taken in early 1980's. The rapprochement of Lutheran churches took place with the clear understanding that a communion of churches exists not despite but within differences. For the churches of the Lutheran World Federation, communion has never been understood as an association of like-minded individuals but as a deep fellowship of a variety of churches of the Lutheran confessional tradition seeking common witness to the world. A communion that exists in diversity draws on the mutual recognition and reconciliation of churches whose mission takes place in various socio-cultural contexts. A communion that exists in diversity is not on the way towards uniformity but rests in the reality of recognition and reconciliation of differences that bring both joy and challenge to the communion.

Part II: The Gift – Participating in Christ

The second part explores further the nature of communion as a participatory gift. The basic understanding of the church's communion as a gift will be approached from a variety of viewpoints that both reflect classical Lutheran thinking but at the same time employ new vocabulary. As Lutheran churches our communion reflects a basic shared understanding of the Gospel. We listen to the Word of God and receive God's promise, which is a free gift, in our hearts. The Word of God calls us to be faithful to Christ's calling. God addresses us in various forms, through all senses. As we hear God's address, as we taste God's promises, we are claimed as God's beloved children. We see water poured in the font and recall that Christ emptied the divine self that we might be Christ's body. We are touched both emotionally and physically by the other members of this same body of Christ. We experience the Church as communion as a foretaste of the coming Reign of God, in bread and wine. In our experiences and in communion with Christ, the Church as communion becomes embodied. The gift of communion is received sensually because the One who justifies is the same God who creates the world. Luther's rich theology of creation informs our understanding of communion as clearly as does his treatment of redemption.

The word of God addresses the churches and calls them to discern their mission in the present era.... As the churches are addressed by God they become addressable by each other as we live in the fellowship of God's communion. As churches we are also addressed by the world with its cries, hopes and questions. The Church does not exist for its own sake but for the sake of Christ who also meets us through our neighbors in need. By engaging in conversation with God's word, the world and with one another, the Church is faithfully engaged in the discernment of its mission within the contemporary horizon.

The Gospel also addresses us in the mutual conversation and consolation among brothers and sisters, wherein we meet the living Word. The Church's mission, therefore, is shaped by "was *Christum treibt*", i.e. "what advances, or urges, or carries Christ". As Lutheran churches our sense of the Church is characterized by a passion for God's good news and our compassion towards each other and the cries of the world.

Part III The Task – Followers of Christ

The third part of the document discusses more concrete aspects of embodying the global communion.

a. *Accountability - Autonomy*

The LWF Constitution's language of autonomy and accountability echoes the wording of a political federation. Being a communion is qualitatively different from being a federation. The change from federation to communion requires us to revisit our understanding of the relationships between the member churches, as they exist both as separate entities and as in communion with each other.

The notion of "autonomy" has several meanings. In a legal sense "autonomous" means self-governed. In this sense autonomous churches are churches that are as legal entities independent. They may make their own decisions what comes to governance. "Autonomous" can also independence from outside control or being capable to exist independently. In the latter meaning we speak of autonomy in the sense of "responding, reacting, or developing independently of the whole". While being a communion of churches does not eradicate the member churches' status as self-governed churches it does challenge the way in which the churches exercise their autonomy. Being in communion challenges us to exercise autonomy that is not complete independence from the others. When using the language of autonomy to speak of the freedom of each member church, we want to speak of "purposeful freedom", i.e. freedom to serve. In Luther's language we can speak of "bound freedom" that binds us to serve.

Autonomy and accountability are not contrasting ideas. Both in their autonomy and in their accountability the churches are exercising a "bound freedom". We recognize that individual churches are accountable to their context and membership as well as the catholicity of the church as expressed in the Lutheran communion. These accountabilities, contextual and catholic, are in a dynamic relationship. In reality each church is "differently accountable". The language of accountability also speaks of the ways in which the church seeks to be apostolic, i.e. accountable to the Gospel and the Scriptures, to history and tradition. With this in mind, we suggest opening a new way of discussing "autonomy/accountability" distinction by speaking about "accountability to context/accountability to catholicity".

b. *Naming of challenges*

Diversified accountability gives rise to challenges challenges when member churches identify differences as intolerable. The question is when does it become impossible for churches within the communion to recognize each other as churches of Christ and what are the consequences?

Another challenge has to do with the variety of decision-making structures existing in the LWF member churches and mechanisms for joint decision-making. Do we have ways of creating a common orientation? How do we relate to decisions made by individual

member churches?

One of the major challenges is that of jointly reading the Holy Scriptures. What criteria do we use for a shared reading of the Bible and how does our context contribute to our interpretations?

Lastly one has to acknowledge that the challenges of diversity do not exist only among but also within churches.

In naming the challenges we have, we also want to give concrete examples of the ways in which the challenges are already addressed within our own communion or other Christian world communions. We want to offer examples of deepened, lived communion where the local and global exist in fruitful relationship. We understand communion as a gift, an act of the Holy Spirit, and therefore as a gift that is given to all God's people. These varied examples of communion offer multiple roads and various bridges for the churches' joint effort toward a deeper communion.

c. Forms of Fellowship

This section will deal with the question of the variety of ways in which we may envisage life in communion. Communion has several aspects, e.g. spiritual communion, communion in joint action or organizational communion. This section will explore the variety of mechanisms we have for learning to be a communion together. It continues to deal with the question of shared criteria for distinguishing between the acceptable and non-acceptable (e.g. confession of faith, sharing Eucharist and the Word of God, basic human rights, etc.). This part will also deal with issues relating to the use and abuse of power within a communion that is marked by different understandings of power distance, gender, uncertainty avoidance and economic realities. What forms of decision-making mechanisms do we employ and how do these mechanisms control or allow the use of power? Do we base our decisions on consensus? On the power of experts? On the will of majorities? How do theological, ideological and cultural perspectives inform our decisions? Here, we will explore the idea of being encouraged to be engaged and to be accountable for one's opinion.

Finally we will explore the issues of joint accountability. What mechanisms do we have for joint consultation and conversation on the one journey we share in different contexts? How do we make time for the other, to listen to one another, to communicate, to share the taste of communion, to be sensitive to the suffering of the others? We want to emphasize listening to the quieted voices, those who have stayed in the margins or have been silenced.

Epilogue: Walking Together

The final part of the text will bring together the main ideas of the text and explore the shared journey of the Lutheran Churches. How do we walk together as a communion? How do we nourish trust, how do we encourage but also admonish each other. We seek to find ways of sharing the opportunities for both lamentation and celebration. This section seeks to confirm our commitment to each other and to the gift of communion we have already received.