



THE
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FEDERATION

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Because We Know God's Voice (John 10:4)

LWF PRESIDENT'S OPENING ADDRESS

Geneva, June 2019

Salutation

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ. It is my great pleasure and privilege to welcome you to our second meeting since we were elected to the Council at the Twelfth Assembly in 2017. I bring you fraternal greetings from the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria (LCCN), my pastoral jurisdiction, and from my beloved wife, Ruth.

We give thanks to the Triune God, who brings us together at this Council meeting, a microcosm of our communion. I ask God to visit our broken world with healing and reconciliation. I pray for all those who have been affected by both natural disasters and those caused by human beings. I pray for those who have lost loved ones, for those who are incapacitated or dislocated. May God give ears to our intercessions. Amen.

I would like to express my profound gratitude to you all for your sacrificial service to the Lutheran communion despite demands emanating from your primary responsibilities. You are greatly appreciated.

My appreciation also goes to staff at the Communion Office under the leadership of General Secretary Rev. Dr Martin Junge. Words alone are insufficient to convey our gratitude to all the staff for their commitment in implementing the decisions of the Council and evolving new ways of strengthening the work of the communion, especially during this time of transition. Thank you.

“Because We Know God’s Voice”

This year we gather under the theme, “Because we know God’s voice.” The biblical narrative in the Gospel of John (chapter 10) is familiar to most of us. Jesus used images of a shepherd and his sheep that were familiar at that time to describe the connection between himself and his followers, particularly to show the clear distinction between what he brings to his flock and what other shepherds bring. There was uncertainty about who Jesus was, whether he really could be trusted, and how. Was he the Messiah or just another self-acclaimed teacher in town? After all, was he not the son of a carpenter?

Jesus had answered these questions by pointing to the things he accomplished that could only have been divinely inspired. In this narrative, Jesus identifies himself as the true shepherd (vv. 1-5). Because of the lack of belief on the part of his listeners (v. 6), Jesus speaks of himself as “the gate of the sheep” (vv. 7-10), offering another way to understand his relationship with the people. Even then, not everyone seems convinced. Only his own sheep hear and know his voice.

Jesus, as the shepherd, has the wellbeing of his sheep at heart, rather than his own wellbeing. This distinguishes him from those he described as thieves and bandits, whose main purpose was not the good of the sheep but stealing, wounding and even destroying the sheep. Jesus as the shepherd, enters the sheep fold in the right way and openly not through the back door. Conversely, the sheep not only recognize the voice of the shepherd but know the name by which they are called. Professor Sarah Henrich of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, notes, that there is a relationship of trust among all parties here. The sheep are not presented as totally dumb. They hear, follow, flee false shepherds, and “know” who to trust.¹

Jesus, as shepherd, is trustworthy. In verse 4, he brings the sheep out of the fold and then goes before them. The sheep do not run as though liberated from confinement. They are not venturing into the world on their own. They are not left on their own or abandoned but led by the shepherd who goes before them, leads them.

Clearly, God in Christ is portrayed as the good shepherd whose life and work are dedicated to the sheep and their wellbeing. This illustration is also utilized in Psalm 23 and Ezekiel 34. This image contrasts sharply with those who prey upon the sheep for their own purposes, dealing with the flock in undignified way and creating anxiety within it. The one indelible distinction of Jesus Christ as a good shepherd was his ultimate sacrifice of dying on the cross to save his sheep: “I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10:14).

What does this mean?

Being far removed from the original context of the story, including the simple village experiences of the shepherd-sheep relationship, we must ask: what does this mean? What does it mean that God

¹ Sarah Henrich. Commentary on John 10:1-10. St. Paul, Minnesota: Luther Seminary, May 15, 2011.
https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=931 (accessed 4th April, 2019)

in Christ is our shepherd and that “we know God’s voice”? The way we know God’s voice shapes our identity and how we live out our faith together, and in the world.

In the first place, we affirm that we are the people of God’s pasture (Psalm 95:7; Psalm 100:3). We hold that it is God who justifies us by grace through faith in Christ Jesus. We know God’s voice through Christ suffering on the cross. We know God’s voice by the reading and hearing of the gospel message of Jesus Christ. We experience God’s presence through the Word and the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion; and through fellowship with one another.

As people of God’s pasture, we have the promise of the gift of life in abundance – as Jesus later says in John 10:10. God feeds us in Word and in the sacrament of Holy Communion. And we can count on God’s leadership as we live out our calling. We have the assurance and comfort that we are neither walking alone nor abandoned - even in the most challenging circumstances. Even when we have doubts, we can count on the guidance of the Holy Spirit to help us discern God’s voice, what God is up to in the world today.

Martin Luther’s Small Catechism commentary on the first of the Ten Commandments suggests that knowing God’s voice is like this: “We are to fear, love, and trust in God above all things.” In a world where trust and long-term mutual confidence in both religious and public circles is volatile, we have been promised that we can trust God’s voice through Christ Jesus, and that “it is well with our souls.” We can trust God for our wellbeing.

On the other hand, Luther’s Small Catechism on the Ten Commandments also reminds us that knowing God’s voice does not end in fearing, loving and trusting God. From the second through the tenth commandments, Luther would say, we are to fear and love God so that... Knowing God’s voice has deep implications for us in real life. It leaves us with these questions: how do we understand what God is doing amid today’s complex realities? What implications does this have for our engagement in the world? Furthermore, what are we as The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) called to be and do in this world? How do we make it a better place, where there is peace, justice and equity, respect for human dignity, unity in diversity and religious harmony?

Let me highlight some of the dimensions of our self-understanding and actions in the world.

A missional fold, sent into the world

The narrative of the good shepherd in John 10:16 points to the missional dimension of the shepherd that we must not ignore. The shepherd’s concern is not only about the sheep within the fold, but equally for those outside the fold, that they too may be tenderly brought into the pasture and the tent to rest. Consequently, we must never relent in sharing. “The true treasure of the church [which] is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God” (Luther’s Thesis 62). This treasure, the gospel of the incarnate Son of God, freely received, must be freely given – (2018 Council theme).

Therefore, the church is never just for itself. The same is true for the LWF, our Lutheran communion of churches. Those who laid the foundation for the LWF were very clear about the call to be witnesses of God’s love in Christ in the world. As those following in their footsteps, withdrawal unto ourselves and showing concern only for our own welfare is never a choice. In a recent discussion with Bishop Peter Skov-Jakobsen of the Copenhagen Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark, we came to affirm that for the church to think only of itself is a form of captivity, and a hindrance to the gospel. Building on Saint Augustine’s thinking, Luther defined sin as the heart (and the whole person) curved into itself (*cor incurvatum in se ipsum*). We must build on the liberating grace of our

Lord Jesus Christ, to continue moving away from self-preoccupation, and offer bold witness of God's salvation in Jesus Christ in our world.

While reliant on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we are also called to constantly discern God's voice. We must listen to the voice of God, still calling out today, asking, "Whom shall I send?" to my people in deep need; to those bound by shame and greed; to those in darkness and despair; to those shackled by fear. Our response must be: "Here we are." Heal us from our selfishness, teach us your way and grant us the grace to answer your call.

Called to respond to voices crying for peace and justice

Today, there are so many forces that stand in stark contrast to Christ's declaration, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Every day, we are confronted with the sad "breaking news" of violence, disasters and other catastrophes. Thousands of people are killed, socially dislocated or excluded for different reasons. Many constantly face dehumanizing conditions because of their race, identity or religious affiliation. Fanaticism and extremist tendencies that are religiously, politically or economically motivated seem to be increasing in many countries of the world, inciting fear and causing division among humanity - "us" and "them". As people marked and sealed forever by the good shepherd, we are called to work against manifestations of the other shepherd who only comes to steal, kill and destroy. We must never give up our duty to witness against inequality in society, to find ways to respond to systems that further increase the vulnerability of the poor; and we should never give up in our efforts to hold governments and institutions that "wantonly oppress the poor and deprive them of their daily bread" accountable.² It is never enough to pity the poor and the marginalized.

We must also not lose sight of our vocation of inter-religious dialogue. We share space with many other religions and therefore have no alternative but to engage with them theologically and in practical ways. As the theologian Hans Küng has argued, "There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions."³

We must also not abandon the plight of those who suffer persecution because of their minority status or beliefs. Many survive under harsh conditions where their human rights are denied - and their lives threatened. There is no doubt that the church is facing hostility in many parts of the world. In addition to our humanitarian response to those suffering because of their social, political and religious status, we must explore all diplomatic opportunities to halt the increase of these crises. The point is, our diaconal response to the suffering of our neighbors, including those being persecuted, must always be accompanied by prophetic witness. We should never be satisfied only with welfare, feeding the poor. Rather, constantly and persistently, we must ask why the poor are poor. "The prophetic task of

² Luther, Lord's Prayer, Fourth Petition, Large Catechism. Quoted in "An Economy of Grace: Inequality and Lutheran Witness," Ryan P. Cumming, 04/01/2019. <https://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/1264> (accessed 15/04/2019)

³ Hans Küng, March 31, 2005, at the opening of the Exhibit on the World's Religions at Santa Clara University". <http://quotegeek.com/personalities/hans-kung/10296/>

the preacher ‘in the congregation’ is to unmask injustice openly and boldly before God and men.”⁴ Of course, this kind of prophetic witness often comes with great risk especially in contexts where the space for dissenting voices is shrinking. Yet, that is an integral part of our calling.

Our call to unity in Christ

Our commitment to Christian unity, both within the communion and ecumenically, must never be shaken. Over the years, the LWF has provided us with a platform for deepening worldwide connections and engagement theologically and spiritually, mutually sharing and learning from each other, listening to each other’s pains and standing together in common action.⁵

Together, those who founded the LWF responded to the then massive suffering in Europe. Together, we engaged in theological reflection and building capacity for the mission of God in the world; responded to the challenge of apartheid in South Africa; and other human catastrophes. We journeyed ecumenically, daring to address painful ecclesial scars, healing difficult memories such as we did with the Mennonites in 2010. With deep gratitude to God, this year we mark twenty years since the signing of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ). That is a very significant ecumenical milestone in our journey from conflict to communion. Through our global diaconal instrument, the Department for World Service (DWS), we have responded to war-ravaged regions of the world and devastation brought by natural disasters.

Sisters, brothers, each of us, each church, is a part of, but not the whole body of Christ. Indeed, we have come a very long way together so we cannot afford to be sources of pain for each other. While there will always be differences in our understanding and other reasons for disagreement, let us not cast each other away. As we often pray with the Psalmist, “Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me” (Psalm 51:11). In a world where it is easy to sever ties and relationships, our unity is a profound witness. Yet, our collective voices against all forms of injustice should be stronger and more efficacious.

Called to hear creation’s cry for healing

Amid the many voices, there is another voice that is constantly crying out that must be heard. It is the voice of creation (the earth) that is “groaning in labor pains” (Romans 8:22). Creation is groaning through environmental degradation; its impact is catastrophic, with devastating cyclones, floods and droughts. The crisis – this climate emergency – calls for dramatic intervention. As God’s servants, we are called to be good stewards of creation. The groaning of creation is the voice of God groaning in pain. We are called, not just to honor creation and hear its groaning, but to act in response. We must act, alongside our brothers and sisters and church communities, because God calls us to be engaged, fruitful human beings on this earth. I am deeply grateful that this is one of our thematic

⁴ LW 13:34-51. In *Together by Grace: Introducing the Lutherans*, edited by Kathryn A. Kleinhans, 118. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2016.

⁵ (see Kathryn Johnson, “Gifts and Tasks of our Larger Lutheran ‘We’”, in *Together by Grace: Introducing the Lutherans*, Ed. Kathryn A. Kleinhans, Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress, 2016, p152ff).

issues outlined in “With Passion for the Church and World – LWF Strategy 2019-2024”. I applaud our youth, who have taken leadership in many ways. Perhaps the concept of planting of the Luther Garden in Wittenberg should not just die out as an event that marked the 500th commemoration of the Reformation but be a signpost to remind and inspire ongoing reformation, including listening to the groaning of creation. And the groaning of creation is also the groaning of the incarnate Christ the shepherd, the one who leads the way so we can journey with hope and courage.

Our confidence as stewards of the global communion of churches

As the LWF Council, we are responsible for the governance, but not the management of the communion, and that often presents some tensions that we need to overcome. This body is responsible for setting policy directions that are implemented by the management of the Communion Office. As I understand it, the most important purpose of the Council is interpreting the resolutions and actions of the Assembly and providing a sense of direction for the communion’s faithful response to God’s call in our changing world.

Looking back since our election, I am very pleased about our collaborative spirit and commitment concerning our growth as a communion of churches and our witness in the world. I am grateful that we have even developed the capacity to work between meetings using electronic media. This requires tremendous commitment, for which I am most grateful.

During this Council meeting, we are going to address some rather complex issues, including questions around the location of the Communion Office, the financial sustainability of the communion and the restructuring the Communion Office. Because we know God’s voice, we can venture into the unknown and we can make very difficult decisions. It is God who gives us the grace to discern what is God’s voice among the countless voices we encounter today. When confronted by something that seems fearful or strange, like sheep, we too can become disoriented or fearful. We are afraid to do something that is not politically correct. Yet, we can walk by faith, trusting the “Good Shepherd” for leadership, guidance and protection.

While engaging in such difficult debates, I urge us to draw on the spirituality that guides our leadership and focuses it on the goals we share as a communion of churches. We are stewards of the resources availed for the communion and its work in the world. I do hope also that we are mutually enriched through moments of devotion and prayer, especially our times of ecumenical worship.

Closing

Sisters and brothers, again, we give thanks to God who has made it possible for us to convene as a Council. Still today, the true shepherd calls us out and by his grace through faith we know God’s voice. This same voice that calls and liberates us from sin and death also calls us to the slums, to the wounded, to the marginalized and so many depressed and hopeless neighbors.

I pray that God grants us commensurate grace to carry out the responsibilities entrusted to us with diligence and integrity. I am very grateful for your commitment and service and I am looking forward to your contributions during our time here, and in the subsequent years of our tenure as LWF’s Council.

May Christ, the crucified and resurrected, our Good Shepherd, guide us in our deliberations and fellowship as we work to enrich and nourish the communion to the glory of the Triune God, Amen.

I thank you for listening.

Archbishop Dr Panti Filibus Musa

LWF President