



Following the star

LWF 2024 Christmas Message

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. (Matthew 2:9-10)

The story of the wise men, who follow the star, find the newborn child in a stable in Bethlehem and pay homage to him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh is one of the best-known and best-loved stories in the Bible.

Maybe we are drawn to this story because of its striking visual imagery which we recreate every year on Christmas cards and in crib scenes adorning our homes, our churches and even our public spaces. From our earliest childhood, we can see the star, the three mysterious figures, their gifts and the child lying in the manger. These images remind us how God is revealed to us both through the ordinary and extraordinary.

But maybe we are also drawn to this story because it reminds us of what it means to be church, bringing light and life to the world. Let me explain.

As Lutherans, we believe that all our worship, our work, our whole lives should always be pointing to Christ, just as Luther himself points to Christ in



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the famous 16th century altarpiece by Lucas Cranach. This Christ-centered witness calls us to contemplation and action. We too are called to be a sign, shining a light even in the darkest of places, leading others to discover the Christ child in the manger.

As the wise men found out, this journey may lead in unexpected directions, to unconventional places, through difficult terrains. Like them, we must sometimes choose new roads. This is our vocation, our calling to follow where God is leading, to watch and listen, to discern the signs of our times and to respond to the needs of those we meet, even though this may involve risks and take us far outside of our comfort zones.

Where is the star leading me and you today? Where are we being called to stand with the marginalized, to give food and drink to the hungry and thirsty, to clothe the naked, to invite strangers in, or to visit the sick and the prisoners? [Matthew 25]

As President of The Lutheran World Federation, I have been privileged over the past year to visit many of our member churches in different parts of the world where people and communities are pointing to Christ and witnessing to the gospel in so many different ways. Recently, in Hong Kong, I met with Asian church leaders who are speaking out for religious freedom, standing in solidarity and bringing hope to those who suffer from war, conflicts or oppression.

In Brazil, I witnessed the strength of churches committed to peace and justice, caring for God's creation and accompanying the most marginalized people in their communities. Earlier in the year, during a visit to Tanzania and Ethiopia, I experienced the vibrancy of the churches running schools and universities, hospitals and many other services ranging from food security to climate resilience and care for children with special needs. In visits to Ukraine and neighboring Poland, I saw firsthand how churches are on the front line, standing in solidarity and bringing much needed hope to those fleeing from Russian aggression.

Through these diverse ministries, churches and congregations are reflecting the light of the star which first shone over the stable at Bethlehem, guiding the wise men to experience the joy and wonder of that first Christmas night. Like the star, they direct us to the Christ child, the light of the world, who brings hope and healing to our wounded world. In Bethlehem, in Gaza, throughout the Middle East and in so many other places, let us pray for God's healing, for peace, for an end to conflict and suffering.

Wherever you are this Christmas season, I hope that you, like the wise men, may be "overwhelmed with joy" as you celebrate Christ's coming into the world. I wish you and your loved ones a very blessed Christmas.

Bishop Henrik Stubkjær
President of The Lutheran World Federation



*Image: Tee Justine, Nigerian designer,
on behalf of The Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria.*

The Lutheran World Federation
Chemin du Pavillon 2
1218 Le Grand-Saconnex
Switzerland

www.lutheranworld.org
info@lutheranworld.org



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