THE
LUTHERAN
WORLD
FEDERATION

Office of the
General Secretary

EMBODYING THE WORD

Keynote address, Leadership Conference of the Americas, Guadalajara, Mexico, May 2025

lutheranworld.org

Rev. Dr. Anne Burghardt

Introduction

Dear sisters and brothers,

What a joy to meet during Easter time, a season when we gratefully recall the encounters Jesus had with His disciples after His resurrection. These encounters continue with His disciples today. We are called to share our encounters with Him, the embodied Word par excellence, so that spaces may be opened for others to have such encounters as well.

When I first read the theme for your leadership conference this year, “Embodying the Word,” I saw it as a continuation of last year’s theme: “Do not be afraid! There is good news!” from Luke 2. In the Gospel of John—which begins with the powerful hymn about the incarnation of the eternal Word—we read in chapter 20 about the disciples gathering behind closed doors on the evening of Easter Day, because they were afraid (John 20:19). They hadn’t yet encountered the risen Christ, and they were no longer sure if Jesus truly was the embodied Word.

And then, suddenly He stood among them—greeting them, offering peace (the two are linguistically the same in this part of the world as we know) and breathing upon them the Holy Spirit. In that moment, their fear disappeared. Empowered by this encounter, the disciples were ready to go out and share the Good News, to make the new creation visible—to embody, in and through their lives, the Word they have witnessed as loving, compassionate, and liberating.

Embodying the Word: an incarnate theology

“The Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1) and continues to dwell among us through the Holy Spirit. But what does this deep embodiment of the Word mean for theology? What should be the characteristics of a theology that is truly incarnate?

- An incarnate theology is contextual: It must comprehend the context in which it is lived, discerning where the gospel must challenge cultural practices and prevailing systems—and where it can, or even should, be inculturated. It also needs to find a language that is understood in the given context. The Apostle Paul, preaching to the people in Athens, didn't just use the classical Jewish language for explaining the gospel, but makes instead a reference to Greek poems: "as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we, too, are his offspring" (Acts 17:28).
- An incarnate theology is both personal and communal: It includes the deeply personal dimension of the relationship between God and each human being, but it is also inherently communal—for no one can be church alone and we cannot be truly human apart from others. In the Gospel stories, we hear how Jesus, who was constantly on the road, surrounded by his disciples and people, occasionally spent time alone in prayer (e.g. Matthew 14:13). The Lutheran tradition offers an approach that could be called "communal individualism": this is not a self-centered individualism, incurvatus in se, turned inward on oneself, but an outward-looking faith that is at the same time deeply personal. Martin Luther emphasized the dignity, freedom and responsibility of the individual. Faith is a personal matter: God speaks to us, and we respond in faith. At the same time, we pray "Our Father." Luther says that a Christian becomes Christ for others, and that the redeeming love of God that manifests itself in God's promises, will flow through the believers to their social environments.
- An incarnate theology embraces the whole of creation: It recognizes our responsibility to care for the earth and all living things. But it is more than that. Danish Lutheran Nils Gregersen has used the phrase "deep incarnation" to express the idea of the radical incarnation of God in all matter. This is closely connected to Luther's incarnational and sacramental theology which insists that God is present, as Luther says, "in every little seed, whole and entire […] Christ is present in all creatures, and I might find [Christ] in stone, in fire, in water, or even in a rope, for [Christ] is there." At the same time, the whole creation has been "subjected to futility" (Rom 8:20) and as Paul writes, "waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God" (Romans 8:19).
- An incarnate theology speaks with a prophetic voice: It seeks justice and respectful relationships. It does not shy away from the pain of people or from confronting injustice and the abuse of power. We know that particularly in the Old Testament we hear about many prophetic witnesses who call for justice for those who are oppressed, and call oppressors to metanoia. Jesus positions himself in the same tradition, referring to the words of prophet Isaiah, saying: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19).
- An incarnate theology is compassionate and rooted in God's mercy: It recognizes that all human beings are siblings and thus closely interconnected; the suffering of our neighbor is our own suffering; and the neighbor is not to be defined by the

interpretation of “ordo amoris”, recently proposed by the US Vice-President Vance. The story of the good Samaritan contradicts the idea of defining the neighbor by their circles of proximity to us. In a deep Christian sense, a suffering child in Gaza is as much a neighbor to me as someone living in the same apartment block as I do.

An incarnate theology also reminds us that as human beings, we need pathways towards forgiveness and reconciliation, to make new beginnings possible. Jesus Christ, the divine Word embodied, keeps on reminding us of this. It is not about cheap grace – to refer to Bonhoeffer – but it is rather about forgiveness and mercy going hand in hand with repentance.

Incarnate theology, however, becomes credible only when it is authentic, when words are translated into deeds. In some parts of the world, there is a big concern of young people leaving the church. When young people see inconsistency between what is preached and lived, they often respond by “voting with their feet” and leaving the church.

Let me now dive a bit deeper into the different aspects of incarnated theology as outlined here, particularly in the context of the LWF.

The context and the need for hope

I mentioned that one of the hallmarks of incarnate theology is contextuality, sensitivity to the context and the ability to read the signs of the time. You can be against globalism, but nobody can deny that in our times the world is closely interconnected. For this reason, contextuality will always mean understanding both the global context and the local cultural contexts. So, what does the global context today look like?

Almost a year ago the LWF Council approved and adopted the LWF strategy for 2025-2031; a strategy you will be engaging with during this meeting. The Strategy offers a context analysis that is still valid: “We live in a world where nationalism, fundamentalism, xenophobia, extremism, racism, and populism in all regions are on the rise, where fear is exploited to build campaigns and maintain power.”

The wars in Gaza and in Ukraine continue; both are driven by ideologies that can well be described with this context description from the strategy. The many dead children, the damage to infrastructure will only increase discord and hatred in future generations. Millions of refugees are fleeing the conflict in Sudan, human rights are under attack in many countries across the world. Humanitarian and development aid is decreasing, with the world’s largest economy, US, having withdrawn most of its support. However, already during the pre-Trump era, things didn’t look that great. Only five members of OECD (The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) reached or exceeded the UN-agreed benchmark of allocating 0,7 % of GNI (Gross National Income) to development assistance (Norway, Luxembourg, Sweden, Germany and Denmark). The remaining 26 countries were under the agreed benchmark, e.g. with US having

contributed with 0.24 % in year 2023, while still being the largest net contributor in 2023 due to the size of its economy.[1]

Democracies are being undermined from within. Churches in democratically oriented countries are witnessing democratic structures being jeopardized or undermined through the rise of populist and far-right parties. We see this across Europe, in the USA, and in Latin America. Here, the challenge is particularly insidious as the term 'democracy' itself is often co-opted by those who, while claiming to represent the majority, are seeking to establish anti-democratic structures. This challenges churches to clarify not just democratic structures but democratic culture.

It may also mean that churches witness in an increasingly non-democratic contexts where freedom of speech and freedom of religion are questioned and there is little space for being active and vocal in the public space. Under these circumstances, the churches themselves must be spaces where just relationships are practiced, where inclusion is lived out, where everyone, women and men, young and old, can contribute with their gifts.

We also live in times when multilateralism and global cooperation is increasingly questioned in secular context. In 2023, the UN Secretary-General Guterres warned of the growing risk of a “great fracture” in the world, which is materializing increasingly. Particularly in this context, the churches need to offer a countercultural example and show that global cooperation is possible; that trusting ‘the other’ across the boundaries of one’s own church or state is possible.

In today’s world, where national self-interest and protectionism are often promoted as top priorities by populist politicians, the witness of the LWF can serve as an example of how to maintain an open identity. The LWF is a confessional communion, in which all member churches are constitutionally in full altar and pulpit fellowship with one another—making it different from looser forms of association or fellowship. This also entails a shared theological understanding of grace and the importance of serving the neighbor as a response to this grace.

At the same time, we are not an inward-looking confessionalist communion but affirm that “to be Lutheran is to be ecumenical.” This reflects our desire not to be self-concentrated, to confess the gospel alongside other Christians, to be in dialogue and cooperation with interfaith partners, to stand in solidarity with all people of goodwill in defense of human dignity, and to serve our neighbors—regardless of their background, gender, religion, or ethnicity.

By presenting a well-grounded identity, while remaining open to collaboration with others, we can offer an example even to the secular sphere where it often seems difficult to combine a national identity and positive attitude to multilateralism.

It is not a secret that the inward-looking, hate-inspired and exclusive ideologies are also present among our own constituencies in the churches. Many who vote for populist

1 https://public.flourish.studio/story/2786612/

parties, whether for Trump in the USA, for the “Alternative in Germany” in Germany, while belonging to Lutheran churches, are driven by fear. We need to address these fears. One cannot hold a dialogue with extremists but we have to engage in dialogue with those who are still willing to speak to people who hold an opinion different from their own. It can be tiring and challenging but it is needed. The gospel is not partisan, but when it touches people’s hearts and minds, it can also translate into party politics and the way how society is shaped. But these hearts and minds need to be reached first. In a polarized world, embodying the Word means practicing reconciliation and listening to each other, while not giving up the values we stand for. As said, this can be very hard and create a lot of internal tension. But it is much needed as we are the Body of Christ together.

Despite all of this and perhaps partly precisely because of this, what stands at the center of LWF Strategy, is “Hope”. The hope we have in mind is not a simplistic optimism – it is a hope that is eschatological, both in terms of the present and future. It is based on the faith in Jesus Christ who empowers us to be the messengers of the new creation; to be those who create “communities of hope,” to speak with the language from the message of the Thirteenth LWF Assembly. When the Word was embodied in Jesus Christ, when the incarnated Word was crucified and rose from the dead, it wasn’t pronounced from the rooftops and heralded by the mighty of the world. The embodiment of the Word happened quietly, gently, and still it changed the world forever. May that be an encouragement also to us in times where there seems to be so much pushback to what we stand for as LWF: whether protection of human dignity, gender justice, support to the needy and the oppressed. As churches and together as a communion of churches, we have to continue to offer tangible, holistic hope, based on proclaiming the Good News in words and deeds. Even a tiny change towards more just, reconciled and respectful relations between the people is a reason for joy in the presence of the angels of God (to paraphrase Luke 15:10) and a step towards embodying new creation.

Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.” May this be our motto in these difficult times.

Elements of incarnate theology

How does an incarnate theology offer hope and alternative vision, given the global context we just discussed?

An incarnate theology: personal and communal

One of the four priority areas of the new LWF Strategy is called “responsible theology.” This is a term that was coined by the assembly in Krakow in opposition to misleading theologies which can take different shape according to the context. In some contexts, prosperity gospel continues to be one of the main theological challenges. In other contexts, it can be a very individualistic approach to one’s relation to God, with Jesus looking more like a lawmaker than liberating Savior. But misleading theology can also be an ideology that has been translated into the language of theology and takes into focus only a certain group of people.

Whatever the concrete expressions of misleading theology in a given context, it is always about putting something other than God's grace and gospel at the center. Most often it is about emphasizing God's judgement over God's grace. Thus, misunderstanding the relation between law and gospel.

Misleading theologies can have a more individualistic or more collective starting point. The more individualistic expressions of misleading theologies often seem to take a pious starting point – concern for one's salvation. This can come with the risk of becoming incurvatus in se – self-centered and completely absorbed into one's own soteriological concerns. For me, it is beautifully illustrated by the following story. A few years ago, I attended an ecumenical Anglican-Lutheran dialogue meeting. On Sunday morning, the participants were going to the local Lutheran parish to attend the worship service. Behind me was a Scottish Anglican priest who had a wonderful sense of humor. Suddenly I heard him quietly singing an old Anglican hymn with a pietistic undertone. When he arrived at the refrain which started with words "Jesus is mine", his voice suddenly changed and he was purposefully singing these words louder, with a light grimace, as if he wanted to keep Jesus only to himself. After having sung the refrain, he said: "You see, this is exactly the problem. There are far too many people who think that Jesus belongs only to them. Jesus is not "mine" in the sense of me possessing him". And indeed, we – and all of our brothers and sisters, not only us –, belong to God but God doesn't belong to us.

What is common to a more pietistic piety and prosperity gospel, is a deeper-lying understanding that grace can be earned. In the end, according to that understanding, it becomes about "my" merits and me "earning" salvation for myself.

Faith is always personal but never individualistic. Responsible theology nurtures personal faith but always directs the eyes of an individual towards Christ and one's neighbor.

Misleading theologies that rather take a collective or communal starting point, are mostly rooted in concerns about the "ordo" of life; about ways how life is organized on a societal, communal level, and the related fear of life becoming un-ordered. We can think here about theologies that have adopted ideologies, singling out one group of people who were considered "chosen" for a certain land, task, or similar, excluding others and leaving them a subordinated role. Apartheid, justification of slavery, subordination of women or labeling ideologically motivated wars "holy," are classical examples for misleading theologies that take in one way or another a societal "ordo" as a starting point.

Responsible theology, which is rooted in embodiment of the Word, in incarnate theology, is grounded in the gospel and in the theology of the cross. The cross is the revelation of divine grace. This theology, deeply rooted in incarnation, highlights how God heals wounds, creates unity, and strengthens communion through the Holy Spirit. In baptism each of us was called by name into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Out of the grace we received in baptism, grows the readiness to build inclusive communities where people can flourish with their gifts regardless of gender, ethnicity, age, or social background. During a time where women's rights are questioned again, Lutherans must

stand firmly behind the understanding that women and men are given equal dignity and must be given equal opportunities.

The work of gender justice needs to include both men and women and it will include accepting changings concept of masculinity which may not be easy, particularly in heavily patriarchal societies. Similarly, including young people in decision-making processes is not self-evident in many cultures. Therefore, we need to initiate intergenerational conversations. Some of our churches are used to be monocultural or monoethnic. But the Body of Christ encompasses all. Christ invites us to see a sibling in a person belonging to other ethnic group as us; in migrants and refugees who are seeking new home and protection from often seemingly endless insecurity and violence. To be a thriving church means to be an inviting and open church where we need to learn to live with differences and give space to others.

An incarnate theology: encompassing the whole of creation

Responsible theology is also ecumenically open-minded. One of the themes where Christian churches are increasingly finding a common ground, is the need to protect God's creation and to recognize its own right of being, regardless of it being useful for human beings. The Late Pope Francis, who passed away on such a symbolic day – Easter Monday – said in his encyclical letter Laudato Si': "Together with our obligation to use the earth's goods responsibly, we are called to recognize that other living beings have a value of their own in God's eyes: "by their mere existence they bless him and give him glory", and indeed, "the Lord rejoices in all his works" (Ps 104:31)[2]. But he also reminds in this encyclical that God, in Jesus Christ, became part of the natural, created world.

In the Lutheran tradition, as mentioned earlier, incarnate theology reminds us of God's deep presence in the creation, also among non-human creation. The Lutheran theology of the cross – which insists that God is present also and even most of all in brokenness and pain – can also help us to face the sin of ecological devastation, the injustice of the effects of climate change on the poorest of the poor. It can help us to formulate an analysis of both sin and redemption capable of addressing the ecological crisis.[3] Barbara Rossing has written about Luther's incarnational and sacramental theology that discerns God in all of life, recalling his writings during the dispute with the Reformed about the understanding of the Holy Communion: "Luther insisted that the finite can really hold the infinite: finitum capax infiniti."[4] This is an important reminder to us about the presence of God in creation that "waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God" (Romans 8:19).

---

2 https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papafrancesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

3 Wanda Deifelt, « From Cross to Tree of Life: Creation as God's Mask", in Karla Bombach and Shauna Hannan (eds.), Eco-Lutheranism: Lutheran Perspectives on Ecology, Minneapolis, p.169-76 [4] Barbara Rossing, "And God saw that It was good", in: Anne Burghardt (ed.), Creation-Not for Sale, Lutheran World Federation, 2015, p.11.

This presence cannot be thought of without the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit. Particularly in this year where we celebrate the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, we are invited to recall that a focus on God the Creator is always a trinitarian focus. The recent Lutheran-Orthodox Joint Statement on the Holy Spirit states, "The action of the Triune God upon creation proceeds from the Father through the Son and is perfected in the Holy Spirit. The Father is the preliminary cause of being, the Son, the Word, is the creative cause, who brings all beings into existence and the Holy Spirit is the perfecting cause. "Perfecting" encompasses the Holy Spirit's task of giving life and sanctifying Creation."

The Ecumenical Patriarch has often reminded us that the current ecological crisis is in its essence a spiritual crisis, based on the consumerist attitude towards the creation and towards one's neighbor. For us in the LWF, the climate emergency and care for creation have a spiritual as well as advocacy dimension, both of them calling for action. Prayer and the call to walk gently on this earth must be translated into actions by churches: into awareness-raising about the climate justice, realizing that women, children and indigenous people usually suffer most under the effects of climate change; into changing one's practices and attitudes; into advocating for the change in policies; into sharing of good practices – there are plenty of them around and churches can and should be at the forefront in sharing about actions that can be implemented locally.

An incarnate theology: speaking with prophetic voice

God's Word wants to be embodied in the world. Biblical prophets raised their voices against the tendencies and practices that hinder this embodiment, that distort the world and the relationships as God intended them to be. These prophetic voices almost always go hand in hand with a call to repentance. But often, the voice of prophets is also a word of consolation to those who are hurt in spirit and body. It also has a pastoral dimension, if we think about some of the prophecies spoken during the Old Testament time of exile in Babylon.

The prophetic voice needs to be directed both inside and outside the church. Directed inside, it may sometimes be pastoral, as already mentioned, but it also needs to be critical vis-à-vis church structures. Churches should thus be self-critical, ordering their affairs in accountable and transparent ways, both with regards to institutional structures and processes and with regards to theological teaching. Where a church falls short of it and of servant leadership, it should be called to metanoia.

At the same time, Christian communities also have a public dimension, being called by God to be "transformative agents in the world" (Rom 12:2). In 2016, the LWF Council issued a public statement "The Church in the Public Space" which builds on the Lutheran distinction between the worldly and spiritual realms, reminding us that the task of the church is not to dominate the public space but, rather, to warn against any worldview or religion, Christian or other, becoming an ideology that would dominate the public space. Further, the statement reminds us that "Churches and congregations are called to move beyond their institutional comfort zone and prophetically to dwell amidst the cries and hopes that fill their local and global contexts. Thus, when churches isolate themselves

from the broader concerns of their societies, they betray their calling to be salt and light to the world (Mt 5:13-16)."[4]

Many of the concerns of today have already been mentioned. There are a number of different global forums that identify main risks and challenges in the world today. The different issues vary in ranking on different charts, but main issues are the same: state-based armed conflicts; extreme weather events; misinformation and disinformation; polarization and inequality; forced migration; cyber warfare and AI-related developments.

The task of the churches is to acknowledge the problems that hinder the embodiment of the Word and run counter to the life in abundance as God wants to see it. Churches are called to talk about the root causes that lead to the developments that stand on the way of making the new creation visible. The task of the churches is to be the conscience in their societies that is always reminding of justice, reconciliation and compassion and talks about the root causes of the current challenges. Today, the call for peace and reconciliation and the readiness to avoid simplistic solutions is in many contexts the prophetic voice that is most needed.

Last, but not least, churches should be messengers of tangible hope. I still remember an encounter that Regional Secretary Rev. Sonia Skupch and I had together with partners from ELCA during our visit to the LWF World Service Central America program in Honduras. We met young returnee migrants who had been sent back from the US border, humiliated and anxious about their future. With the help of the program, these young people received seed funds to help them set up their own small businesses. One of the participants said: "When I first heard about this program, I didn't believe it was true. I was sure there was some trick to it. Who would do anything like this – giving something without wanting anything in return?" It had taken a while to convince this young person that no service in return was expected. I have seldom seen as much gratitude and joy in someone's eyes as when he shared his story.

An incarnate theology: compassion and rootedness in God's mercy

In today's world, meritocracy and the understanding that "everyone is the creator of their own luck" are gaining ground. As Lutherans, we have our problems with meritocracy. But even in the secular space, there are examples of mistrust towards this concept. In 2001, an article in the Guardian newspaper pleaded with Tony Blair to stop using the word 'meritocracy` as a desirable goal, indicating that if meritocrats believe that their advancement comes from their own merits they will feel they deserve everything they have. They can be insufferably smug, even believing they have morality on their side.[5] In addition, recent research in psychology and neuroscience suggests that believing in

---

4 The Church in the Public Space. A Study Document of the Lutheran World Federation, 2016, p. 35.

5 Michael Young, "Down with meritocracy", in: The Guardian, 29 June 2001, https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2001/jun/29/comment

meritocracy makes people more selfish, less self-critical and even more prone to acting in discriminatory ways.

The Apostle Paul, Martin Luther and the Lutheran church always become (or should become!) very cautious, when it comes to the idea of meritocracy: it makes us blind to God´s Gospel, to what Christ accomplished for us, because it focuses on human merits and on the measurements of merits. Meritocracy obscures the gospel and leading human beings into self-centeredness, especially if the merits are never meant to be shared for the common good. Grace, and the awareness of living out of grace, on the contrary, opens our hearts, minds and hands for those in need. Instead of meritocracy we step into charistocracy-the rule of grace (charis – 'grace')!

The witness to mercy and the reminder to be merciful are one of our key callings as followers of Jesus Christ today. The call to mercy should be a key component of our advocacy, reminding governments to show mercy and remind them of their duties (just recall the witness of Episcopalian Bishop Budde at the inauguration of US President Donald Trump). But, it should also remind us also to reach out a hand to those, who are lost in the midst of hatred they experience in societies and the expectations that are raised and misinformation that is shared by social media networks – particularly the young people.

I recently watched a television series on Netflix called Adolescence. Maybe some of you have seen it. It is an exploration of how a small town deals with violence and loss, and of how young people struggle with identity, masculinity, and belonging in today's complex social-media-driven world. For me one of its strengths is how it doesn't offer easy or simple answers. Rather, it becomes like a mirror, showing from different perspectives the complexity of dealing with a tragedy, giving the audience a chance to reflect deeper.

The second episode of the series ends with a choir of young people singing a famous pop song by musician Sting. It is called Fragile and we hear the following lines:

Perhaps this final act was meant to clinch a lifetime's argument
That nothing comes from violence and nothing ever could
for all those beneath an angry star, lest we
forget how fragile we are.

For me, the television-series and in particular this song was a reminder that when chaos reigns and violence breaks out, our response as people, communities, and churches, matters deeply. We can mirror anger and fear, or we can embody another way which is shaped by peace, compassion, courage and mercy. That second way is the way of hope.

Maybe this is what it means to embody the Word today: to stand with those "born beneath an angry star," and help them resist the pull of violence, break the cycle of retaliation. Always remembering "how fragile we are."

Let me be clear, this is not a call to passive resignation in the face of overwhelming power. It is a call to courageous leadership that acknowledges pain but is not consumed by it, that creates space for justice, reconciliation, and healing. Leadership that points us to God, whose strength is revealed not in force, but in mercy and in love.

Conclusion

We are not living in easy times. Yet there is a saying, “There is no better time to be the church, than the very time in which we live today ...”. It is today that we are called to serve the Lord and the neighbor; it is today that we are called to be messengers of hope, both in words and deeds. Hope is not the same as optimism. But true hope that is grounded in Jesus Christ can offer comfort and confidence even the most difficult times.

Selma Chen, Church President from the Lutheran Church of Taiwan, one of the two women who lead an LWF member church in Asia, once said: “In Taiwan, the Christians read the Bible. But the other Taiwanese read the Christians.” The world is longing for the witness of children of God, for authentic witness and embodiment of peace, justice, reconciliation and mercy. We are called to be part of this embodiment, everyone in their own context.

This is what it means to be messengers of hope.