

## CLAIMING THE GIFT OF COMMUNION IN A FRAGMENTED WORLD

### 1. Reflections of the LWF General Secretary on the Emmaus conversation and its further direction

It comes with Christ's path of incarnation: as a communion of churches, we don't live apart from realities and tendencies in our world, but are part of them. Touched by the "centripetal" force that reaches us as God's call to be churches in communion, we remain exposed to centrifugal forces that push us into fragmentation and withdrawal. As a communion we face a challenging "*simul*" (at the same time, simultaneously): being full citizens in this world in which we live, yet simultaneously expressing full citizenship of that world that is to come and is realized in Christ.

One of the topics that exposes us in particularly strong ways to this tension between centrifugal and centripetal forces is the discussion about family, marriage and sexuality, or the "Emmaus conversation", as I want to continue calling this dialogue process. Exhibit 10.4 of the LWF Council meeting in 2012 gives a solid retrospective view of the discussion process with its peaks of both anxieties and breakthroughs.

I have heard a lot of affirmation across the communion, and also among ecumenical partners regarding the important step of the Emmaus conversation that the Council undertook last year during its meeting in Bogotá, on behalf of the 143 LWF member churches. The Council came up with five important insights, later on communicated to member churches through a joint letter of the LWF President and myself:

1. Respectful and dignified dialogues on complex issues are possible ;
2. The unique situation of each member church has to be acknowledged;
3. The LWF is a communion with many themes;
4. The LWF communion as a whole should not take action on issues of family, marriage and sexuality;
5. The LWF journey as a communion of churches continues;

### 2. A new situation in the LWF

Since its last meeting in Bogotá new elements have come into the picture, which require attention and discernment by the entire communion, and the LWF Council in particular. The General Assembly of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) at its meeting from 27 January to 2 February 2013 ratified previous decisions of the EECMY Council to sever relationships with Church of Sweden (CoS) and with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), following their decisions on same-sex marriage / partnership and ordination of same-sex ministers.

In its communication to these two churches, which was copied to the LWF, the EECMY declares the altar and pulpit fellowship relations to be discontinued, the partnership agreements between these churches to be terminated, and the development programs and projects to be phased out.

### 3. Immediate steps of the LWF and process thus far

The LWF Communion Office took immediate steps regarding the three churches directly involved in this decision, notably by:

- Communicating: the Communion Office sought and kept communication with all three member churches, convinced of the fact that this is where the LWF communion has to be right now: with its three member churches, talking with them and listening to them to secure accurate understanding (accompaniment).
- Facilitating: the Communion Office has provided an opportunity for direct interaction between the three churches concerned in order to begin to talk about how to actually understand and how to go about this decision with its complex implications, convinced of the value of keeping direct interaction in times of struggle.  
At this meeting, the EECMY reiterated information already shared previously that their decision was not directed at the LWF communion nor was it intended to affect the LWF.

Furthermore, the LWF Communion Office ensured communication with LWF Council members through regular letters informing them about both the decision and further developments.

#### 4. The challenge

As this news of severing relationships has been spreading across the communion, we in the Communion Office have attempted to ensure fair and accurate communication with member churches through their already scheduled regional leadership conferences (Asia, Latin America & the Caribbean, Africa), most of which I attended in person. We have listened carefully to input received at these meetings and discerned together with the communion leadership. Meanwhile, I have also received letters and phone calls from several leaders of LWF member churches expressing their views regarding this situation.

This significant reaction reveals the vitality and intensity of communion relationships in the LWF: a cut of relations among specific churches that are at the same time interconnected in global communion relationships doesn't go unnoticed. The pain of this cut and its resulting wound is felt by the entire body. It is thus far that the communion journey has taken us: relationships among individual LWF member churches are deeply interwoven into the fabric of communion relationships!

Hence, the cut of relations also brings challenging questions to the LWF as to the way it defines and understands itself: how would the discontinuation of altar and pulpit relationships among these three churches relate to the fact that—by the self-understanding and the definition of the LWF—these three churches are, as members of the LWF, in such altar and pulpit relations?

These questions can't be ignored or postponed. They have to be addressed in a proactive manner. And they have to be taken up by the LWF, so that the definition of who the LWF is, what it does and how churches relate to each other as a global communion remains in the hands of its 143 member churches through their existing processes and structures of discernment and decision making.

#### 5. The way ahead

The immediate question before us now is about the path we should choose in order to address this situation. Bearing in mind who we are, the history we share and the vision we have just expressed for our shared journey as a communion of churches through the LWF Strategy, I believe that there is only one way possible for the LWF to choose: *intense and deep dialogue in order to take up the clarification process that the situation at hand is calling for.*

As a way to frame such a clarification and discernment process, let me offer the following principles that I propose should be guiding us:

**Be who we say we are**

- The LWF communion will address this situation in coherence with its own confessional identity, its theological self-understanding, its values, its “ethos”, the approaches outlined in the LWF Strategy and the insights identified in Bogotá.
- The LWF communion is called to carry each other’s burden (Gal 6:2). In coherence with its values, the LWF will therefore approach this situation with a strong focus on how to continue including, instead of how to begin to exclude.
- While deploying its best efforts to accompany the three churches concerned, the LWF communion of churches remains grateful and open for what God has done thus far, and what God does and will do in its midst as the communion continues living and working together for a just, peaceful and reconciled world.

**Offer process and accompaniment**

- Time and space need to be offered and provided, and clear and credible processes outlined so that this issue can be addressed with diligence and determination.
- All three churches need the closest possible accompaniment by all relevant expressions of the LWF with a view towards a healing of relationships and reconciliation.

**Move forward**

- The nature of the journey from federation to communion is irreversible. It is not by undoing, but by furthering its journey as a communion of churches that the LWF communion of churches will be able to both address the pain resulting from the cut of relationships, and to respond to the questions that this raises.

**6.****7. Theology matters**

Let me add to the principles outlined above some theological perspectives that I believe are of key importance as we journey further with these questions. By bringing these theological perspectives I want also to underline that the issues at hand require a strong theological approach (see: “Be who we say we are”).

Three topics have surfaced in our analysis in the Communion Office, which I want to briefly point at:

1. Autonomy and accountability: As a Communion we have not been able to dig deeper into the interrelationship between the constitutional reference to the autonomy of each of the LWF’s member churches to take its own decisions, on the one side, and their mutual accountability as these same autonomous member churches respond together to the call to live and work together in communion, on the other side.

Indeed, this is not only an old question for the LWF, but a perennial one to Lutheran churches around the world. They too face this tension between decisions taken at synods, as dioceses and congregations have their own boards which retain the autonomy to uphold or not to uphold synodical decisions.

I believe a legal approach won't take us further if we have not addressed the deeply theological issue that would undergird whatsoever constitutional language. The Augsburg Confession with its almost 500 years offers tremendous wisdom for this question of accountability and autonomy. From there one can easily recognize that the issue of accountability and autonomy is ultimately also a deeply spiritual issue as it is only through patient accompaniment, which includes admonishment and affirmation, that this tension between a church that is both autonomous and accountable can be embraced.

Lately a question has been recurrently coming back to my mind: how did Peter and Paul go back to their respective congregations, after their harsh discussions and gentle handshake in Jerusalem (Gal. 2; Acts 15)? Did they simply pick up agendas where they had left them? And if not, why didn't they just continue with business as usual?

And what about us, who come together as a Council? What are the structures and processes that allow us to accompany each other as we go back to our places and continue serving in our respective contexts, to which we are accountable as well?

2. Contextuality and catholicity: We are back to ecclesiological questions, therefore, which the LWF Mission Document "Mission in context – transformation, reconciliation and empowerment" laid out with prophetic vision (p. 29-30):

*"Faith is by nature incarnational, firmly committed to a time, a place, and a culture. As local congregations endeavour to engage in mission, they must seek a balance between locality and universality, for universality and particularity are inseparably connected with each other. Without the universal communion of faith, each local church is unable to find a genuine self-understanding in the local context. For the church in mission, therefore, catholicity or universality without contextuality leads to imperialism, and contextuality without catholicity leads to provincialism."*

It is quite revealing actually, that it is the LWF Mission Document that has lifted up this important relationship between contextuality and catholicity with such clarity. Because it gives a missiological framework to this discussion, which I think, is very helpful for the LWF: it is because of the gospel that wants to be everywhere in this world, and finds its way to be everywhere, that the church, which we as Lutherans understand to be a creation of the word (*creatura Verbi*) is to be contextual. The universality of the gospel calls for the contextuality of the church. Yet, this contextuality requires to be framed by catholicity. The LWF stands for holding together this dialectic relationship between contextuality and catholicity.

3. Communion sanctorum or communion of the likeminded? None of us have faith and are part of God's church because of ourselves. Lutheran theology insists on the "extra nos" (outside ourselves) character of faith, of faith being beyond our control, but something into which we are brought (baptism), and which ultimately relates to God's action. Faith is a gift of God, not our own product.

I believe that there is also such an "extra nos" in our being together as a communion of churches. Isn't to be in communion a calling, before it is a decision of ours? One may decide to join a federation, but a communion...? The LWF has moved beyond being a strategic alliance to respond to diaconal, missiological, theological and ecumenical challenges together, as it was in 1947, the year of LWF's founding, and has become a communion that sees itself called to be a

“communion in Christ, living and working together for a just, peaceful and reconciled world” (LWF Strategy, vision statement).

Hence, it is not like-mindedness that is the source and bond of our togetherness as a communion of churches. I believe that the LWF communion needs to resist the current tendency in our world to align ecclesial relationships along the criterion of like-mindedness, particularly around specific issues of ethics. Instead it needs to uphold the call for intentional and devoted stewardship of communion relationships, into which churches have been called on the basis of their shared confessional identity, thereby indeed struggling to discern what Scriptures and its powerful message of salvation is calling churches *and* this communion to be.

I want to finalize these reflections reminding us of an important sentence in the LWF Strategy (p.21):

*“As a communion of churches we will find ways better to discuss the issues that potentially divide us – issues such as human sexuality and different interpretations of the Scriptures – in ways that honour both diversity of views on important issues and the more fundamental basis of unity among us. We will first of all rely on the power of Eucharistic worship and prayer.”*

This is how 143 LWF member churches see themselves journeying together as they grapple with the centrifugal forces resulting from differences on issues of family, marriage and sexuality.