



The Church in the Public Space

A Study Document of The Lutheran World Federation



THE
LUTHERAN
WORLD
FEDERATION

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Editor: Department for Theology and Public Witness

Design and Layout: Department for Theology and Public Witness
Office for Communication Services

Cover photo: On the eve of the first day of COP20, the UN climate talks in Lima, a Vigil for the Climate was held near the Pentagonito where the UN talks are to be held. Christiana Figueres, the head of the UNFCCC and Manuel Pulgar-Vidal the Peruvian Minister for the Environment and President of the UN meeting, spoke to the crowd and a symbolic lighting of candles began the celebration that marks the end of one year of monthly fasting by religious and environmental groups around the world in the Fast for the Climate. Photo: LWF/Sean Hawkey

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Preface

Martin Junge

“Liberated by God’s grace”—we affirm and celebrate this life-giving and joyful experience as we move towards the Reformation anniversary in 2017. The impact of this experience goes far beyond the walls of the church; it has a tangible impact on the public space. The Reformation was a catalyst for change, both in the church and society. Martin Luther’s pastoral and diaconal concern for people compelled him to go to the public—to protest, critique and advise on the basis of what he had recognized as the truth of the gospel. He agonized about people’s suffering, and it was his prophetic anger about the powerful in the church and society that impelled him to put forward his theological insights, developed in prayer life and academic research.

“Liberated by God’s grace”—churches build communion and actively engage in the public space to work towards justice, peace and reconciliation. Sometimes this takes shape in highly visible activities, at other times churches give a bold witness by serving their neighbours in need through quiet and persistent diaconal presence. The Lutheran World Federation (LWF), through its member churches, programs and projects, has been heavily involved in community-based action for peace and justice and human rights advocacy.

At the same time, the LWF has engaged in theological reflection that deepens our understanding of being church in the public space today. The LWF conference, “Global Perspectives on the Reformation. Interactions between Theology, Politics and Economics,” which took place in Windhoek, Namibia, around Reformation Day 2015, provided sharp analyses and inspiring perspectives for theological discernment on burning public issues today. Furthermore, the LWF invited ecumenical and interfaith partners jointly to explore how religious communities can meaningfully contribute

to the strengthening of the public space, through consultations in January 2014 in Münster, Germany, in May 2014, in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania and in September 2015, in Hong Kong, China.

This study document was prepared by an international group of Lutheran theologians that was appointed in November 2014 by the LWF Meeting of Officers: Archbishop Dr Antje Jackelén (Sweden) as chairperson, Bishop em. Dr Suneel Bhanu Busi (India), Rev. Dr Eva Harasta (Austria), Dr Eneida Jacobsen (Brazil), Kathryn Lohre (USA), Dr Jerzy Sojka (Poland). Because of his appointment as Minister of Poverty Eradication and Social Welfare in Namibia, Bishop em. Zephania Kameeta had to withdraw from the group and Rev. Lusungu Mbilinyi (Tanzania) was appointed to replace him. The study group met in January 2015 at the Evangelische Akademie Bad Boll, Germany, at the Windhoek, Namibia, conference in October 2015, and at Sigtuna stiftelsen, Sweden, in February 2016. I would like to express my gratitude to the members of the group for their tireless commitment to this study process.

I invite member churches, LWF programs and projects, theological seminaries, ecumenical and interfaith partners to study this document and to engage with the questions it raises. This text is an important reference document for the Reformation anniversary activities and beyond. May this document be a tool to empower the Lutheran communion and its partners actively to engage in the public space locally and globally, so that it be a just place for all.

Introduction

The global discourse on the public role of religion

In recent years, humanity's age-old question about the role of religion in society has gained renewed public attention. Since religion touches people's hearts, minds and actions, it has enormous power and influence. There are impressive precedents of how religious ideas and activities have contributed to people's well-being by protecting people's dignity as well as addressing and transforming poverty and suffering. Across the globe, people tell stories about how their faith or religion has the potential to guide, liberate, comfort, empower, transform or heal their lives, both individually and communally. Because of its power, religion has been praised and applauded, but sometimes also viewed with fear and suspicion. Religious actors who have acted in manipulative, dominating or violent ways have been subject to criticism and sometimes resistance. Whenever religious actors forcefully compete with one another the destructive and divisive effects create great concern.

While faith and religious belonging give people strength and empower them, it can also create vulnerability. Religion sometimes exacerbates hidden power dynamics, but it also has the potential to expose and unveil the tacit dynamics of power, oppression and vulnerability.

The question about the role of religion in society touches on people's existential experiences and raises systemic concerns. Whether or not religion is a public or private affair and how the secular and religious spheres should be distinguished in society have been subject of debate. Globally, this discussion is influenced by at least five significant discourses:

- **Religion and politics:** How should religious communities, political actors and institutions relate to one another? What is the constitutional and legal framework for religious life in society and how do people of faith live out their citizenship in their respective societies? How do religious actors affirm or undermine international human rights standards?
- **Religion and economics:** How do people of faith articulate how they envision social justice? How do people of faith act as producers, consumers and traders in the context of the neoliberal market economy? How do religious communities respond to the fact that market rationality has become the dominant logic in almost all spheres of life?

- **Religion and culture:** How do religious communities respond to the way in which culture influences how people perceive, interpret and analyze reality? How do religious communities use cultural expressions, such as the media, and how do these use religion? Is there critical and self-critical reflection on the use and misuse of the media? How do different kinds of media and other cultural expressions help or hinder the creation of a public space in society?
- **Religion and violence:** How do religious communities respond to violence in homes, in institutions, on the street? How do religious teachings and religious practices condone or invite to acts of violence, and how do they overcome violence and facilitate reconciliation? How do religious communities bring their vision of peace to bear on the public space in credible and tangible ways?
- **Religion and science:** How do religious and scientific worldviews interact? What kind of scientific knowledge can enhance the church's engagement in the public space? How can our faith in knowledge (science) and the knowledge of faith (theology and religious practice) work together for the common good of the world?

In times when in many countries the political debate has become polarized, it is crucial that religious communities involve women, men and youth in addressing these questions—both within and outside their communities—in diverse settings such as leadership meetings and reflection in theological seminaries, meetings in religious communities and at places of worship. All five discourses impact the breadth and depth of the public space in society.

Religious communities articulate how their distinct faith narrative envisages a shared public space while listening to and being fully aware of the perspectives of other religious and non-religious convictions. In this process, communities look for and affirm common ground and through their interaction come to respect differences.

God's engagement with the world as basis for the church's role in the public space

God loves the world and never ceases to engage with it: this deep faith conviction motivates the churches to engage in the public space. God created the world through the Word and brought it to life through the Spirit. In the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God entered into the world in the most profound way, coming with deep compassion into the joys and sufferings

and hopes and pains of this world. In Jesus Christ God celebrated the joy of the wedding at Cana, ensuring that there would be enough wine for all. In Jesus Christ God endured torture and the humiliating death on the cross, thus ensuring that every dimension of human life, even the most cruel and painful experience, carries the promise of God's presence. God chose the incarnation of Jesus Christ as the way in which to reveal to humanity and the entire creation what God is all about. God's engagement with the world moves the church's theology and praxis into the world—into public spaces.

As churches and Christians we are shaped by the gospel message, the liberating power that transforms us to live a life that reflects the gospel. The rediscovery of justification by grace through faith during the Reformation entailed a renewed vision of justice in society and transformed individuals, the church and other institutions. The spiritual clarity that resulted from the deepened understanding of the gospel message set free an amazing energy to contribute to the transformation of society. One concrete example is the strategic approach to addressing poverty through the institution of the common chest and thus to realize the community's responsibility to care for the poor. The reformers called on the political decision makers and economic centers of power not only to alleviate people's immediate needs but also the cause of poverty, economic marginalization and ignorance.

Education for all, one of the main concerns during the Reformation, has continued to be at the heart of the church's presence in the world. The goal is to empower people to be mature agents who can manage their own lives and meaningfully contribute to the common good. Education was seen as a holistic process that involves the liberation and development of mind and heart, body and soul, thus empowering all people fully to realize their vocation as citizens.

For Lutherans, just and accountable governance in church and society have always been a key concern. Whereas in former centuries, Lutherans have tended to focus their attention on state authorities, in today's democratic and plural societies there has been a shift toward affirming the key role of civil society and citizens who actively participate in the public space.

Lutherans are active in the public space, not only in their individual capacity, but also as a community of believers. The Lutheran churches have always been active in the wider society through word and deed. Since its founding in 1947, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) has issued public statements and resolutions on topical issues through its governing bodies. The first resolution of LWF's first Assembly in Lund focused on advocacy for "homeless and displaced persons and refugees without regard to their origin, language, nationality, or status."¹ It

¹ The Lutheran World Federation, *Proceedings of the Lutheran World Federation Assembly, Lund, Sweden, June 30 – July 6, 1947* (Philadelphia, PA: The United Lutheran Publication House, 1948), 92.

called on national governments and the United Nations to support the freedom of religion or belief. Since then, the LWF has continuously published statements on particular topics and challenges, including recommendations to member churches and political decision makers at different levels.

The church's active presence in the public space includes religious communication, such as preaching and praying as well as communication in secular genres such as public statements and diverse forms of advocacy. The church's actions range from diaconal intervention and community-based action for peace and justice at the local level to working for institutional change at the local and global levels.

Each church has its own historical trajectory with regard to how it has engaged in the public space. There are several external factors that influence the ways in which churches are active in the public space: the constitution and legal regulations provide a framework for how religious communities can organize themselves and interact with others in the public space. Furthermore, majority/minority situations influence the scope of action of religious communities. Another factor with regard to the churches' agency in the public space is the proximity to or the distance from actors in other spheres of society, such as for culture, economics, politics, media, academia. It is clear that the churches' agency in society does not only depend on numbers, as there are numerous examples of where creative religious minorities have had a significant impact on their societies.

In some situations, churches have been guided by the prophet Jeremiah's call. "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jer 29:7). This has led churches actively to seek the collaboration with other communities for the well-being of all. There where churches have become quite strong or established, the Pauline warning not to conform has become an important reminder for the churches' witness: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom 12:2).

The aim and structure of this document

On the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, this document seeks strongly to articulate public engagement as the church's ongoing response to the freedom that is ours in Christ to love and serve the neighbor. In such engagement the Reformation insights on the gospel, church and society come to fruition. As together we look toward the future as a global communion, this document calls the LWF and its member churches to deeper public engagement.

In the first section, this document outlines the characteristics of the concept of public space and promotes the idea that public space is to be understood as a “just place for all.” It sheds light on how the church’s presence and activities can contribute to creating public space that is inclusive, just and peaceable.

The second section outlines the theological rationale for public engagement from a Lutheran perspective. The baptismal vocation is seen as the foundation for the church’s public engagement. Through faith we experience that God liberates us by grace. Such faith provides the horizon against which to imagine the well-being of all as God’s intention for this world and grants the freedom selflessly to care for the neighbor in need. This document reviews the insights and challenges related to the theological concept of the two kingdoms, also called two realms or regimes.

In the third section, the characteristics of public engagement are spelled out in relation to the triad in 1 Corinthians 13: faith—hope—love. The churches are called to engage in analysis, discernment and action to identify the place where it needs to speak out and act, with whom to cooperate and whom to challenge.

The fourth section shows in an exemplary way how this is being lived out in the LWF in relation to five public issues. Furthermore, it outlines how three core dimensions: practices, ideas and structures, need to be engaged as churches contribute to the shaping of public space as a just place for all.

The final section captures the main ideas of this document by proposing an “ABCDE” for engagement in the public space.

Each of the sections can be used as a tool for analyzing the dynamics between the church and the public space in the reader’s own context. The three questions after each section can guide such reflection.

Public Space as a Just Place for All

A just place for all

Our aim as Christians is to make all areas within the public space freely accessible to everyone, without distinction of any kind, such as color, caste, religion and gender. This has both physical and social connotations: public spaces are places accessible to a collective as opposed to privately owned places and, as such, they can be spaces in which society communicates, shares ideas, resources, criticism and information on various issues. In physical terms, a public park, for instance, is primarily public. It can also be a place for social gatherings and political demonstrations and thus assume a communicative, social function.

Public spaces can be spaces of social empowerment when groups, traditionally excluded from social, political and economic processes, make their voices heard, have their claims publicly addressed, and are therefore able to contribute to the development of public policies and cultural transformation. In past decades, new social actors have raised awareness on feminist, economic, environmental, caste and racial concerns.

An inclusive, integrated public space is the result of several public spaces coming together in a space with shared ownership and belonging. Social communication, enabled by the intersection of various public spaces representing different interests and concerns, plays an important democratic role in the formation of public opinion and the joint striving for justice. Through the encounter with and acknowledgement of different perspectives, demands and aspirations, a society is better equipped to work toward the well-being of all. Three foundational elements characterize public space as a just place for all:

- Equal access to common goods and political decision-making processes
- Safety, especially for the vulnerable
- Meaningful participation of and interaction among all groups in society.

Public space—the reality

An inclusive public space allows for equal access and participation and all who enter it should feel welcome and safe. People's actual experience of public spaces, however, is often a far cry from this notion.

- Indigenous communities in many countries struggle for justice and dignity. They advocate for their right to land and livelihood and aim at overcoming poverty and receiving access to public services.
- People with physical disabilities continue to encounter difficulties in the public space since they often lack suitable access to buildings and public transportation and, as a consequence, cannot live out their basic political and economic rights.
- Racism and casteism are pervasive realities leading to countless experiences of discrimination in all spheres of life and to recurrent outbreaks of violence, destruction and death.
- Freely walking in the streets is often not safe for people, especially women and people who are perceived to be different.
- A new awareness is emerging about aggression against gay, lesbian and transgender people in the public space.
- Diverse acts of religious intolerance haunt many societies and the absence or poor enforcement of the freedom of religion or belief inhibits equal access to the public space.
- Vulnerable and minority groups have less access to common goods and are often unfairly portrayed in the media.
- The public is bombarded with advertisements vaunting unrealistic body ideals and an unsustainable consumerist ideology.

The dynamics of manipulation, domination and exploitation are at the root of segregation, unequal presence and exposure to danger and violence. Groups that are ignored or actively marginalized from the public discussion and whose demands are not properly addressed are excluded from the public space. Exclusion is closely connected to the domination of certain groups by means of political, economic, cultural or religious power, or the power of the media. Exclusion may also occur in the form of harassment.

In this case people are included in the public space, but their inclusion is subject to pressure and intimidation.

Violent, manipulative and intimidating ways of communicating make draw our attention to the need constantly to strive for a public space that is welcoming to all, one in which people of different identities can peacefully and meaningfully interact as equal persons. To act in public spaces comes with the obligation to uphold and enhance the welcoming, inclusive and interactive character of such spaces.

Finding appropriate methods for handling conflicts in the public space is vital. Voices that want to poison the public space and hate speech undermine the shared public space. Such experiences call for a legal framework that enables and protects free, meaningful and non-violent deliberation in the public space. This needs to be promoted and supported by an ethos of public interaction.

Fluid boundaries

The distinction between the public and the private cannot be applied in any strict sense. The public space of a society is in continuum with the individual and the communal. From our homes and churches we take part in public interaction through online forums, small group conversations and different religious events. We engage in issues that affect our lives not solely as a collective, but also in a very personal way. Social arrangements that respond to the basic needs of food, shelter and clothing, working rights, health and education directly impact our daily lives. They determine how many hours we are able to spend with our families, how secure we can feel in the event of sickness and injury and what prospects we can offer to future generations.

The boundaries of the public are fluid and subject to renegotiation. When we define public spaces as spaces accessible to a collective as opposed to places privately owned, we must bear in mind that rights of ownership are not natural, but can only be held with some public support. Likewise, when we describe public spaces as spaces of communication in which a society shares ideas and information, we are reminded that most publicly discussed concerns are not strictly related to the collective but also to the lives of individuals, small groups and associations.

Environmental protection and climate change, for instance, are public issues that speak to all of us, and require actions at the individual, organizational, as well as governmental levels. In public spaces, we help raise awareness of and receive new information about the challenges of pollution, water security, the exploitation of human and natural resources

and to common resolutions to be implemented by individuals, institutions and governments.

The structures of families, private life and intimacy define gender roles for women and men. These roles play out both in private and in public, and cannot be assigned to one sphere alone. A strict notion of the private has been used to confine women to their homes and prevent them from entering the spaces of academia, politics and religious leadership. A fluid notion of public and private, that underlines the relational character of the two, enables a critical approach to the power relations that underlie gender identities and that have historically excluded women from emancipatory processes in the public and confined them to the private.

Churches as public spaces

Churches have a public dimension, as they are called and sent to be transformative agents in the world. With their vision of the common good churches contribute to public life. This not only happens through their speaking and acting outside, but also through the way in which they create space inside the church. Church members often come from different backgrounds, i.e., age, gender, education, social class, race, caste, sexual orientation, ethnicity. In the midst of such unique diversity, church members find an important space in the church to discuss challenges that affect their societies as a whole. Not only from the pulpit, but also in smaller groups, people may have the chance to talk about such issues as their experience of religious intolerance or the various forms of gender, racial, caste and economic inequalities found within their own church and society at large.

Besides offering spaces for communicating on matters of shared concern, churches also have a physical public presence in society. Places of worship contribute to the shaping of the public landscape, church rituals are visible and church bells can be heard by passers-by. Churches can offer a space for those who seek peace and quiet and provide refuge and shelter for those who are at home in the public space.

When church communities actively participate in the public space they encounter people and groups of other faiths and worldviews. They seek to address shared concerns with the aim of contributing to the common good. Justice and peace are God's gifts, not only to those who assemble in the same church, but to all of creation. Christians are called to participate in God's mission that brings life in abundance to all—not only to church members. When churches isolate themselves from the broader concerns of their societies they lose the chance to be the salt and light to the world

(Mt 5.13—16). In Christ God embraces our fragilities and sufferings and brings human existence into new life. Churches are inspired by God to step out of their institutional walls and prophetically to dwell amidst the cries and hopes that echo from their local and global contexts.

Questions on the dynamics of the public space

- What are the prominent and dominant public spaces and the main public issues in your context?
- Who are the influential actors and whose voices need to be heard more?
- How can we improve the quality of public conversations?

Being Church in the Public Space —A Lutheran Perspective

Liberated by God's grace—our baptismal vocation

As church we engage in the public space—not in spite of our faith, but inspired by our faith. The gifts of baptism and Holy Communion guide and strengthen the church's witness in the public space. The gift of baptism constitutes the church as a community; it provides a special bond between Christians and between churches.

Baptism testifies to the unconditional grace of God, the creator of all, who works toward a new creation in the midst of this world, and who relies on human beings to prepare God's way. The Triune God shows steadfast love often in surprising ways. The incarnation in Jesus Christ tells the story of how Christ entered into this world and emptied himself (Phil 2). The way of the cross turns our human ways upside down, questions prestige, power and status and opens up a new way of being in this world.

Baptism teaches the church to regard all people as created in the image of God and endowed with equal dignity. Confident that God has reconciled us with Godself, we are liberated to care for others. In his treatise on *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther succinctly articulated this as follows:

A Christian is lord of all, completely free of everything.

A Christian is a servant, completely attentive to the needs of all.²

By joyfully declaring that everybody who “comes out of the water of baptism”³ is in direct communion with God, the Lutheran tradition stresses that every baptized person is called and empowered to participate in all aspects of church life (1 Pt 2). God the Holy Spirit pours out God's gifts on the whole church (Eph 4:11–13; 1 Cor 12:4–11), and raises up men and women to contribute to nurturing the community. Thus the whole church, and every

² Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, translated and introduced by Mark D. Tranvik (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 50.

³ Martin Luther, “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation. Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate, 1520,” in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 44 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 129.

member, participates in the church's public witness. All hearts, minds and hands are needed for the church's task of sharing God's vision for this world and speaking out against injustice. Baptism implies a vocation to a life in faith, hope and love, ready to serve the neighbor and to care for the well-being of all. Thus, baptism is the basis for the Christian engagement both within the church and in the public space.

The gift of Holy Communion sustains and strengthens the community of the church. It is a constant reminder of the reconciliation that Christ brought to the whole world and calls Christians to be ambassadors of the reconciled world (cf. 2 Cor 5:20).

The gifts of baptism and Holy Communion constitute and strengthen the church as the community of God's Word. Together they point toward the church's fundamental vocation, namely its holistic mission in proclamation, prophetic diakonia and advocacy work, of which its voice in the public space is an integral part. The different contexts of speaking and acting in the public—within the church and within society at large—need to be carefully distinguished and related to each other. In this respect, the concept of the two realms that has been developed in the Lutheran tradition offers some guiding perspectives.

The distinction between the spiritual and worldly realms

In Lutheran theology the distinction between the worldly and the spiritual realms has played an important role. Luther strongly criticized undue interference by worldly authorities in spiritual matters, and undue dealings of religious actors in worldly matters. In his reflections on temporal authority, Luther articulated the distinct meanings and scope of both realms and pointed to the limits of each one.⁴

The terminology "two kingdoms" doctrine has in recent years been replaced by the terminology "two regimes" or "realms." The latter terminology points to the two different ways in which God governs the world or, the two different ways in which God cares for the world: at the heart of the spiritual regime is the experience of justification through the sharing of God's Good News for creation. At the center of the worldly regime we find the concern for justice and the establishment of a stable order which guarantees peace in society.

Luther calls the first realm God's "proper work" (*opus proprium*) because spreading the gospel expresses God's very essence, which is love. The second regime, however, is God's "extrinsic work" (*opus alienum*)

⁴ Martin Luther, "Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed" [1523], in Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 45 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), 77-129.

because it is needed only for external reasons, namely human sin which causes destructive disorder in society.

In the worldly realm, laws are used to structure and order society so that all people may live together in peace. Laws are enforced by courts; these are necessary because of the realities of sin and guilt. Still, this realm is also motivated by God's love because it is part of God's preservation of the world (*conservatio mundi*): God does not leave human beings alone with the mess that they have created. But it is not a direct expression of God's love, since authorities need to have the competence and capacity to oblige people to obey the rules or to use force to overcome violence.

The spiritual realm refers to God's rule over the reconciled new creation, which already begins to show itself in the community of believers. No courts should be necessary here since that would directly contradict the character of the spiritual realm. Thus, the distinction between the two realms implies a critique of any attempt to foster the spreading of the gospel by means of external coercion. Article 28 of the Augsburg Confession emphasizes that bishops should preach the gospel, "not with human power, but with God's word alone"⁵ (*sine vi humana, sed verbo*). This describes the character of the church's proper work: convincing, not coercing.

We have to realize that in spite of these important theological insights into the distinction between the two realms, the concepts of religious freedom and tolerance were not yet fully grasped in the sixteenth century. Also Lutheran reformers contributed to acts of intolerance and religious coercion such as against more radical reformers, the persecution of the "Anabaptists," and the uninhibited polemics against the Jews that resounded throughout centuries—acts which have been repudiated in recent decades through seeking repentance and reconciliation.⁶ Because of

⁵ "The Augsburg Confession [1530]," in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (eds.), *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 94.

⁶ In 1984, the LWF Assembly in Budapest received the statements on "Luther, Lutheranism and the Jews." Lutherans acknowledged Luther's anti-Jewish remarks and the violence of his attacks on the Jews as sin, and committed to remove any occasion for similar sin from their churches today or in the future. See the documentation in the appendix of: Wolfgang Greive and Peter Prove (eds.), *A Shift in Jewish-Lutheran Relations? A Lutheran Contribution to Christian-Jewish Dialogue with a Focus on Anti-Semitism and Anti-Judaism Today*, LWF Documentation 48 (Geneva: LWF, 2003), 196, at www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/dts-doc48-jewish-full.pdf.

In relation to the persecution of Anabaptists, and the theological support of Lutheran reformers for this persecution, the LWF Assembly in Stuttgart in 2010 asked for forgiveness "from God and from our Mennonite sisters and brothers." The Lutheran World Federation, *Give us Today our Daily Bread. Official Report. LWF Eleventh Assembly, Stuttgart, Germany, 20-27 July 2010* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2010), 47f. <http://assembly2010.lutheranworld.org/>

these processes we have become more sensitive to the danger of self-contradiction in our teachings and practices. We affirm that it continues to be an important ongoing task to let the *sine vi humana sed verbo* to unfold its full potential.

Challenges in dealing with the distinction

God rules over both the worldly and the spiritual realm. This means that no aspect of reality is outside the grasp of God's commitment to this world and no aspect of reality outside God's reach. The church is called to communicate God's love for this world in word and deed. Therefore, when the church witnesses injustice and oppression in the worldly realm, it needs to speak out, empower the weak, serve the needy and protect the vulnerable.

The distinction between the two realms of God's rule has both strengths and weaknesses. For instance, this concept has been wrongly used to suggest that a truly spiritual church should abstain from public involvement in order to stay pure and perfect. Furthermore, it has encouraged blind obedience in situations where the church should have resisted because of its faith and mission.

On the other hand, one of its strengths is that it helps us to understand how we can interact with people outside the church in the public arena without insisting they become Christian. At the same time, the concept of the two realms does not encourage us to renounce our faith in the public space. In this way, it provides an orientation for living the Christian vocation in a religiously plural society.

A further strength of this concept lies in its diagnostic power in reference to the complex interaction between religion and politics. Luther advised and exhorted the princes about a number of political issues. He did not let the risk of misjudging a situation prevent him from giving political advice. Today, as during Luther's time, this task is fraught with grave misunderstandings. The church needs to follow the public discourse closely and be ever ready to participate in it. Yet, at the same time, the church must never lose the ability to distinguish properly between the worldly and the spiritual realms. From a Lutheran perspective, theocratic political ambitions clearly have to be denounced. The church's task is not to dominate the public space but, rather, to warn against any worldview or religion, Christian or other, from becoming an ideology that would dominate the public space.

uploads/media/Mennonite_Statement-EN_04.pdf The Mennonite representatives received the Lutherans with open arms and said "We joyfully and humbly join with God in giving forgiveness" (ibid., 50). Both sides committed to engage in deeper relationships with one another.

The distinction between the two realms is relevant for discerning the appropriate role of religion with regard to political issues. The distinction between law and gospel functions as a signpost in the church's proclamation. The church's first and foremost task is to proclaim the gospel; however, in order to do this the church needs properly to handle the law. The Lutheran tradition distinguishes between the theological and civil use of the law. In its theological use, the law unmasks and convicts the human being as a sinner. In its civil use, the law aims at upholding civil order in the midst of a sinful world. These two aspects of proclamation underline the significance of making right distinctions and yet keeping the different spheres in relationship with each other, for the sake of God's engagement with the whole world.

Luther was deeply aware of the dangers of unjust government. He called for the critical evaluation of political power, both in the realm of the church and of worldly governance. For Luther, just governance is a prerequisite for living together in justice and peace. The church has to hold the worldly authorities accountable in terms of its understanding of God's grace and justice. Conversely, when a Lutheran church takes up tasks that could or should be carried out by the state, it needs to reflect carefully whether and how these tasks agree with its mission.

Unity under the one rule of God calls for accountable and transparent leadership within the church as well as the worldly realm: how churches deal with difference and organize decision-making processes is an integral part of their public witness. Much of a church's credibility depends on these seemingly mundane matters—and rightfully so. Synodical and collegial structures in which both lay and ordained persons participate are an important part of church governance today.

The church needs to acknowledge and respect that God's rule is active in the worldly realm, and it needs to be open to experience God's presence in the worldly realm. Rights constitute an important framework for enabling participation in the public sphere. They provide mechanisms to deal with difference and diversity among citizens and to ensure equality before the law. Rights are important tools for calling into question discourses of majority vs. minority groups. They allow to name and identify injustice. Based on its vocation as an advocate for all people because they are created in the image of God, the church underlines that the oppressed, vulnerable and poor are not objects of charity but rights holders. Thus, the church engages with the respective legal structures and upholds international human rights standards.

What, then, on the basis of the distinction between the two realms, is the special calling of the church in the political and public space? First, the churches have to advocate against the politicization of religion and the "religionization" of politics. Such instrumentalization of religion and

politics distorts and betrays the meaning and function of both realms, and becomes destructive for the whole of society. Second, the churches have to safeguard the distinction between state institutions and religion carefully—both regarding their own use of power and the rightful use of power by governing authorities. Third, the churches have to observe the political sphere closely, involving themselves there where necessary by drawing on their understanding of God's justice and grace as a tangible social reality. Fourth, churches have to affirm the public space as a shared space where they live together with people of other faiths and convictions. In that shared space human rights have become a way of speaking a common language. Thanks to human rights, we can find a common ground together to address and tackle global challenges.

Questions on the distinction of the two realms

- What are some of your church's historical or contemporary experiences where the distinction between the worldly and the spiritual realms has malfunctioned/worked well/is important today? Which biblical and theological motives guide your church in its public involvement?
- How does your church provide for accountable and transparent governance structures and leadership within the church?
- How can we meaningfully engage in shared public discourses such as human rights and sustainable development goals?

Characteristics of Lutheran Public Engagement

Courage and clarity: the Lutheran public witness in faith

The profound Lutheran conviction that believers are justified by grace is connected to an equally deep awareness of the believer's status as both righteous and sinner. We are helpless before God, continuously misinterpreting God's will. At the same time, we are filled by God's grace, spontaneously fulfilling God's will. Acknowledging these two aspects is the task of all Lutheran believers and shapes the reality of the church as well as that of the individual believer. The church, the community of believers, needs to acknowledge the reality of being at the same time righteous and sinful.

Because of this, the church cannot claim a superior position in the public discourse in the sense of supposedly having holy authority. Christian righteousness lies in acknowledging God as God and grace as a gift. Christians are liberated through God's grace to acknowledge their own unrighteousness and social injustices as a problem that concerns them just as much as society as a whole. This is the courageous public expression of the church's freedom to proclaim and to serve.

The Bible challenges us always to be ready to respond to anyone who demands us to account for the hope that is in us; and to do so with gentleness and reverence (cf. 1 Pet 3:15f). Hence, there is no contradiction between mission and engagement in the public space, as it is outlined in this document. Proclaiming the gospel is a fundamentally public endeavor, be it within or outside the walls of the church. According to the Lutheran understanding, Sunday worship service is a public event, even if it expresses a spiritual community among its participants manifested through the sacraments. Sermons and other forms of proclamation announce God's love and the liberating power of God's grace for this world.

The church depends on listening to the Word of God for its proclamation. In light of the multiple religious messages disseminated by various forms of media it can be difficult to discern God's voice. Therefore, in order for the church to interpret the Word of God, theological reflection is essential. It involves assessing how the church reads the Bible and understands Lutheran teachings today. Analyzing context, locally and globally, is an important part of theological and ethical discernment processes. Such

theological engagement is a seminal source for gaining clarity with regard to the church's public witness.

Patience and persistence: the Lutheran public witness in hope

“In fact, God’s kingdom comes on its own without our prayer, but we ask in this prayer that it may also come to us.”⁷ Luther’s brief explanation of the Lord’s Prayer in the Small Catechism outlines the second dimension of the Lutheran public witness: the dimension of hope in patience and prophetic passion. The Lutheran public witness is enacted against the broad horizon of God’s invitation to God’s promised future. This perspective of God’s kingdom gives the church’s activities clear relevance and strong meaning, but does not make God’s kingdom dependent on the church’s activities. Accordingly, the Lutheran public witness speaks in a spirit of serenity and responsibility. Its “success” ultimately does not depend on the church itself nor, ultimately, on favorable political circumstances.

The perspective of hope points towards the universal scope of God’s justice and grace. The Lutheran public witness looks beyond its immediate given context and seeks to be involved with other contexts. The Lutheran churches engage in the public sphere in the broadest sense, seeking to transcend regional, cultural and ideological boundaries. In this way, the Lutheran public witness aims to broaden the horizon of its own context, to lead to a wider public discourse and to create new public spaces.

Solidarity and empowerment: the Lutheran public witness in love

Living in Christ and transformed by God’s love, we are liberated to love and serve others. But, “Who is my neighbor?” (Lk 10:29). Jesus’ answer expands the ordinary understanding of the neighbor and calls for overcoming boundaries of ethnicity, race, gender perceptions and social status: the other person’s need is all that matters.

The call to neighborly love is an intrinsic part of Christian life. It is the vocation of the individual believer just as it is the vocation of the church as the community of believers. It leads the church into public advocacy and stewardship. Being liberated by God’s grace to love and serve the neighbors implies declaring one’s solidarity with the disadvantaged in

⁷ Martin Luther, “The Small Catechism [1529],” in *The Book of Concord*, op. cit. (note 5), 356.

society. The Christian witness in the public space is guided primarily by assessing the consequences of political decisions for the most disadvantaged in society. The Christian witness in the public space is not directed by the math of the most influential majorities, but by the quest for God's justice and grace for all.

The proper place for the Lutheran public witness is both at the center and at the margins of society. Because, as creatures of God, all human beings are created with equal dignity, the church is called to reevaluate cultural distinctions between center and margin, between powerful and oppressed, between low and high. Bearing witness to Christ's becoming servant to human beings, the Lutheran churches are required to be (self-) critical in their engagement with the structures of political and cultural power.

Dialogue and cooperation are essential in order to create a participatory public space. Building sustainable local communities is one of the basic needs in societies, especially there where people from different socio-economic, ethnic, religious or cultural backgrounds live together. In the spirit of neighborly love, local church congregations play a significant role in building local communities that transcend deep-rooted and inherited differences. The key to equal participation of all in a just and peaceful society is to provide for transformative education so that people can become responsible and mature agents in the family, community and society.

Prophetic diaconal presence lives out a relationship of care for other human beings, both in terms of physical well-being and spiritual empowerment. Thus it tells manifold empowering stories of human dignity and solidarity in the midst of vulnerability, sin and suffering.

Questions on characteristics of the Lutheran public engagement

- What helps or hinders the church from engaging with courage and clarity in the public space?
- What sustains the church as it lives out its public witness with patience and prophetic passion?
- Which concrete practices of solidarity and empowerment are alive in your church at the congregational as well as the leadership levels?

Ways in which the Church Engages in the Public Space

Examples of public engagement

Throughout its history, the LWF has engaged in a number of critical issues of public concern. Brief summaries of five examples serve to demonstrate that consistent, long-term engagement in the public space is an important part of our life together as a global communion. By together engaging in the public space, we live out our common vocation as Christians freed in Christ to love and serve.

Example 1: Engagement for refugees

In the aftermath of World War II and the subsequent migration of millions of people, the LWF actively responded to the need of displaced people in Europe. From its first Assembly in 1947 until today, reaching out to refugees is one of the core activities of the LWF. Today, there are about 60 million refugees worldwide, including internally displaced persons, refugees and asylum seekers, 2.3 million of whom are reached by the activities of the LWF's Department for World Service. Significant efforts have been made in response to the four largest emergencies in Iraq, Syria, Central African Republic and South Sudan.⁸

Example 2: Engagement for overcoming exclusion

At the height of race-based discrimination in southern Africa, which had also affected the fellowship in and among the churches, the LWF pronounced that churches that succumbed to the heresy of apartheid had de facto

⁸ Memorandum of Understanding between the LWF and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2014, at www.lutheranworld.org/news/lwf-and-unhcr-sign-memorandum-understanding-humanitarian-cooperation

“Welcoming the Stranger: Affirmations for Faith Leaders,” a declaration that draws upon principles and values of welcome that are deeply rooted in major religions, affirmed by the LWF Council at its meeting in 2013, at www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Welcoming_the_Stranger.pdf

excluded themselves from the communion. Apartheid was considered a theological matter, infringing on basic theological foundations as was clearly articulated at the 1977 Assembly in Dar es Salaam.⁹

Overcoming racism in all its forms continues to be an important concern for Lutheran churches globally, with the LWF Council issuing a strong public statement that denounced the sin of racism at its meeting in 2015.¹⁰ With a sharpened awareness for overt and hidden exclusion mechanisms, the Lutheran churches also address other forms of exclusion and advocate for just relationships and a culture of conviviality. Conviviality envisages communities and societies based on reciprocal relationships, mutual respect for their differences and strength among people and communities that enrich living together.

Example 3: Engagement for gender justice

As a specific tool to address persistent injustice in gender relations, the LWF Council approved the LWF Gender Justice Policy in 2013.¹¹ This policy builds on decades of work in women's empowerment and the continuous commitment to enable the meaningful participation of women and youth in the decision-making processes in the communion. The resolution of the 1984 LWF Assembly provides for a gender balance of at least forty percent women and forty percent men in all governing bodies and task force committees.¹² The affirmation of women's ordination has been a core commitment of the LWF and therefore is an intrinsic part of the ecclesiological reflections in the LWF.

Example 4: Engagement for climate justice

Together with its ecumenical and multi-religious partners, the LWF has continuously and tirelessly worked to increase awareness of the negative ecological and social impact of climate change. The LWF advocates for policies that protect the environment, mitigate negative effects of climate change, enable

⁹ "Southern Africa: Confessional Integrity," statement of the LWF Assembly in 1977. See: Arne Sovik (ed.), *In Christ – A New Community. Official Proceedings of the Sixth LWF Assembly in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, June 13-25, 1977* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1977), 180.

¹⁰ "The Sin of Racism," public statement of the LWF Council at its meeting in 2015, at www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Public%20Statement%20-%20The%20Sin%20of%20Racism.pdf

¹¹ www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DTPW-WICAS_Gender_Justice.pdf

¹² Carl H. Mau (ed.), Budapest 1984. *"In Christ – Hope for the World." Official Proceedings of the Seventh Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation*, LWF Report No. 19/20 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1985), 224f.

adaption to changed conditions and prevent further destruction. The LWF's action around climate change dates back to its Sixth Assembly at Dar es Salaam in 1977. Since then, Lutherans have demonstrated special concern for the most vulnerable, in particular poor people and indigenous people, through projects such as the Fast for Climate Change Campaign and the participation in multi-religious advocacy efforts toward the 2015 Paris Agreement.¹³

Example 5: Engagement for peaceful interreligious relations

In a world marked by division and strife, also among religious communities, to bring together people of different faiths to deepen mutual understanding and joint commitment to issues of shared concern constitutes a strong public witness. The LWF is committed to promoting interreligious dialogue and cooperation. One of the hallmarks of LWF's approach to interreligious relations is to collaborate with interreligious partners in humanitarian work while engaging in theological dialogue between religious leaders and scholars.¹⁴

Three dimensions of public engagement

For each of these examples, three basic but overlapping dimensions of engagement must be considered: practices, ideas and structures. Together these three dimensions form a comprehensive approach to the church's engagement in the public space.

¹³ "Fast for the Climate" campaign, at <http://fastfortheclimate.org/en/>

"Statement on Climate Justice," public statement of the LWF Council meeting in 2014, at www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Council2014-PublicStatement_ClimateJustice.pdf

"Advocacy and Action for Climate Justice," public statement of the LWF Council meeting in 2015, at www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Public%20Statement%20-%20Advocacy%20and%20Action%20for%20Climate%20Justice_0.pdf

¹⁴ Joint Interreligious Declaration on Peace Building, Democracy and Development, May 2014, Dar es Salaam (Tanzania), at www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Interreligious_Declaration-DaresSalaam_8May2014.pdf

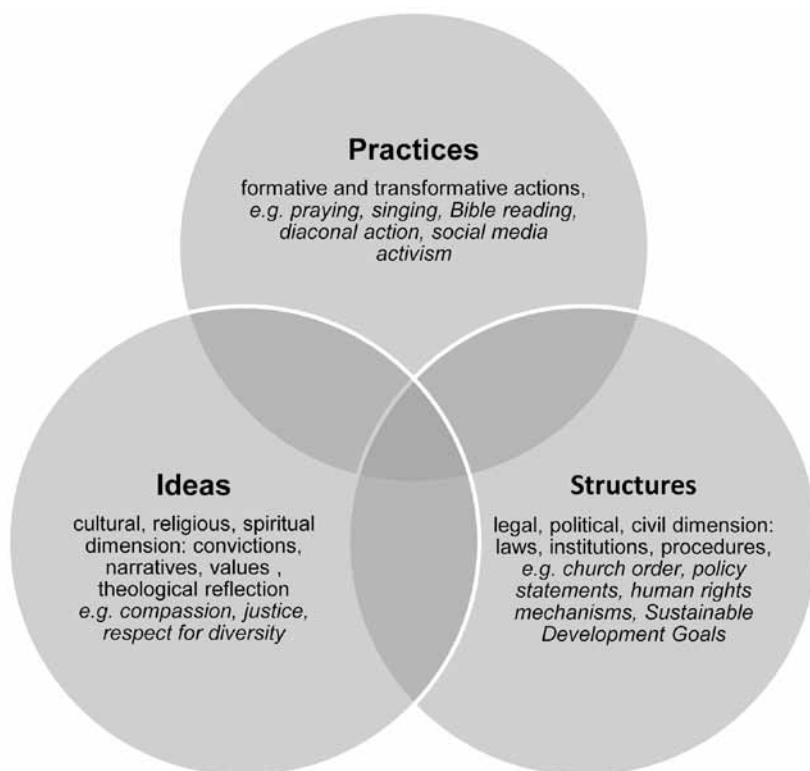
Communiqué of the Interfaith Consultation "Religious Life and Public Space in Asia," September 2015, Hong Kong, at www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/interfaith_consultation_communique_0.pdf

Cooperation between the LWF and Islamic Relief Worldwide, at www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/lwf_and_islamic_relief_collaboration_2.pdf

Simone Sinn, Mouhanad Khorchide, Dina El Omari (eds.), *Religious Plurality and the Public Space. Joint Christian-Muslim Theological Reflections* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2015), at www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DTPW-Studies-201501-Religious_Plurality_in_Public_Space.pdf

First, there is the element of visible, tangible action: concrete practices where people immediately experience something. The second and third dimensions are often rather invisible, but can be even more powerful. The second is the dimension of ideas such as convictions, mindsets, narratives, theologies and values that provide motivation and guide the practices. Thus, this is the cultural–religious–spiritual dimension. The third dimension is the institutional and procedural framework that demarcates the maneuvering space in society. This is the legal–political–civil dimension. Whereas the ideas provide a rationale for the practices from within, the structures provide a rationale and framework from the outside. This distinction resonates with the classic Lutheran distinction of the two realms explored above.

All three dimensions are connected with one another, yet they are never identical. They mutually influence one another and also challenge one another. Ideas often motivate and guide practices, but if practices change, the ideas might also be transformed. Similar dynamics can be shown between practices and legal regulations.



From the very beginning, the overarching criterion for the LWF's public engagement has been whether or not it alleviates the suffering of the most vulnerable. The envisaged goal is to achieve equal access, safety and meaningful participation of everyone—a just place for all. Through the global communion, the churches' shared practices, ideas and structures are intentionally focused on this goal. Even though significant progress has been made, injustice in the public space still remains. This requires that the communion, churches and individuals reflect on past efforts and find new ways of engaging in the public space to bring about meaningful change in society.

Questions on the church's engagement

- How does the church contribute to strengthening accountable structures and to challenging problematic structures in society?
- How does the church, through its spiritual and diaconal practices, empower its members to be active citizens?
- What new and creative ways of public engagement can you identify and imagine?

The ABCDE of the Church's Engagement in the Public Space

Assessing public issues in participatory ways

As many issues of public concern are quite complex and involve many actors, there is a need carefully to examine the issue in order to understand what is at stake. This includes listening to those affected by the issue and drawing on research in the field. In such discernment processes the needs and interests of different stakeholders need to be identified and the power structures involved carefully scrutinized. The church needs to be clear about its own relation to the matter at stake and seek ways to strengthen participatory assessment.

Building relationships of trust

Conflict situations haunt many communities in this world. The church is called to walk in the ways of peace with other actors in society and build relationships of trust. The church offers space for honestly dealing with the divisive realities. The church is called to lead and serve processes of repentance, healing and forgiveness and jointly to walk new ways toward reconciliation. The church invites to mutual accountability and responsibility and is actively involved in invigorating a vibrant civil society, and being part of networks of solidarity.

Challenging injustice

In the midst of complexities, the church unequivocally raises a prophetic voice when people's dignity is violated and basic human rights are infringed upon. At times the church can use established procedures to advocate for the marginalized and excluded, at others it needs to find creative and extraordinary ways to address injustice. The gospel entails a clear vision of transforming oppressive structures and destructive systems. Christians

are called to engage in politics, not for the sake of power, but for the sake of empowering those who suffer injustice. The church promotes the rule of law and good governance as highly important structural conditions for enabling justice and peace in society.

Discovering signs of hope

The church is a place that invites people to discover signs of hope and connect with God's deep love for this world. The church accompanies people on their spiritual journey as they, nurtured by God's Word, breathe hope through God's Spirit. The church connects with initiatives that radiate hope in society by opening up new possibilities there where people found themselves lost or hopeless. Pastoral care, diaconal initiatives and public engagement envisage alternative options there where people felt they were suffocating in destructive dynamics. Sharing hope is an important dimension of the church's public engagement.

Empowering people in need

The church is committed to strengthening people's agency so that they can live out their full potential in life. The gospel entails the vision that all obstacles that hinder people from fully participating in society be removed (Lk 4:18f.) The church is present with people in their suffering and listens to their plight. The church looks for ways to empower the weak and vulnerable through diaconal presence, education, advocacy and sometimes resistance movements. The church rejoices with people as they experience liberation and healing, as they find justice and peace and enjoy their dignity.



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