



The 2012–2013 Word & World Lecture

Reformation and Enculturation: Toward the Five Hundredth Anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation

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Among the many commitments and issues that inform our global conversations today, the forthcoming five hundredth anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation is developing increased momentum. We belong to the generation that will participate in, if not also shape and give expression to, that anniversary in the year 2017. By then, it will be five hundred years since events began to unfold in the remote and marginal village of Wittenberg. Within a short time, they led to an impressive process of religious, political, social, and cultural transformation.

REFORMATION ANNIVERSARY: DOES IT MATTER?

“Okay, but does it matter?” I was asked a few months ago by a friend when I began to talk enthusiastically about this anniversary and its great opportunities. “Does the Lutheran Reformation and this big anniversary have anything to say today?” he went on. “Reformation in 1517 and its spectacular dynamic and world-changing force: Doesn’t this just belong to history?”

Will it matter whether the churches observe the coming five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation? It will if we reshape that story and make it not a celebration of an ancient Germanic past but an event of our own time, recognizing the profound changes between then and now in our relation to our human neighbors, to the world, and our accountability to ourselves.

Does it matter? Let me try to respond with a narrative that I often used in pastoral ministry to illustrate the core theological insight of the Lutheran Reformation. The story is about a rooster on a chicken farm.¹

Every morning when it was still dark, the rooster went out to crow. He did so with amazing commitment, crowing from the depth of his heart and making use of all available resources. Actually, he was convinced that it was because of his crowing that the sun rose every morning. When he had finished his daily job and went back to the farm, he would look around with a sense of paternalistic pride at the hens. “There you go, darlings, I’ve made the sun rise for you,” he even said once.

One morning the sunrise was really wonderful. The rooster got so enthusiastic that he couldn’t stop crowing. The sun had long risen, but he continued crowing, just wanting to make the whole scene even more perfect.

When he went back to the chicken farm, he noticed that he had crowed too long. His throat was aching, and he was only able to produce a weak croaking noise. The rooster panicked. What will happen tomorrow, if I can’t crow anymore? What will happen to the chicken farm and to all these chickens who depend so much on my power to make the sun rise? He went to sleep very early, hoping that the next morning he would be in good health again.

But he was not! The pain had worsened overnight, and he could not even croak, he could only produce a ridiculously weak squeak. Yet, he went out, like every other morning, spurred by awareness of his duty and his panic that otherwise the sun wouldn’t rise and they would all perish. He tried his best, yet could produce no real crowing.

Great was his surprise when he realized that the sun was rising anyway! Slowly but surely it came up behind the hills, like every morning. Actually, it was again one of those wonderful mornings, but this time, it came without his doing! He turned slowly and looked back toward the chicken farm. He couldn’t believe what he saw there: the chickens had come out like every morning as well. All without his crowing!

Terribly embarrassed and depressed he went back to the chicken farm. What could be his place there now? Hadn’t he lost his role, his reason to be? And why should he go out the next morning, if the sun rose even without his help? Oh, he felt so embarrassed. He didn’t even dare to look into the hens’ eyes.

But the hens surrounded him as he was suffering. “Hey, come on, don’t worry,” said one of the hens. “You just go out there like you do every day and continue crowing,” she said. “But don’t go *in order* to make the sun rise. Just go there and crow *because* the sun rises!”

The core of Lutheran theology: grace is like the rising sun! It is there just because God wants grace to be there. Just as no one can prevent the sun from rising, no one can stop God from being gracious either. That, in a nutshell, is what Jesus revealed about God. That, in all its powerful simplicity, is the good news of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is not because of who we are and what we do, but because of who

¹While this story seems to belong to the wealth of the oral tradition, I heard it for the first time from the Brazilian theologian Rubem Alves.

God is and what God does that God grants us new life and the freedom to serve and love God and the neighbor.

that difference between the “in order to” and the “because” will ultimately lead to the way our hands will look as we journey through life: Will they be fisted hands—grabbing, holding, retaining, hitting—or will they be hands that have learned to be open, open to receive what can only be received, never produced?

Still, the question remains: Does it matter? I would say it does, because there is such a huge difference between an approach to life, to the neighbor and the creation, that is shaped by the “in order to” and an approach that is shaped by the “because.” Do we believe that everything is up to us, that we have to do it all, produce it all, control it all? Are we the ultimate reality, the ultimate horizon, and the ultimate reason for everything? Or shall we live our lives out of an understanding that without the preceding action and word, without the ongoing loving embrace of a personal reality that is beyond our control, but on which we simply have to rely—that is, without God—things would go terribly wrong, as they do in fact so often? It matters, I would say, because that difference between the “in order to” and the “because” will ultimately lead to the way our hands will look as we journey through life: Will they be fisted hands—grabbing, holding, retaining, hitting—or will they be hands that have learned to be open, open to receive what can only be received, never produced? The simple gesture that we do at the eucharistic table—waiting, opening our hands to receive—has become a very powerful message for me lately. Where else today do we stand and wait to be given? Where else do we open our hands as we do there? Where else do we understand ourselves in such dependency and in an interrelatedness that has both a transcendent and a communal dimension?

DEFINING AN APPROACH TO THE REFORMATION ANNIVERSARY

The question as to whether or not the 2017 Reformation anniversary matters will depend significantly on the approach we take in preparing for the event. It is about the gospel of Jesus Christ, not about Martin Luther. It is about the human family, not about Wittenberg or Germany. It is about a deep theological and spiritual process with far-reaching consequences for the way we understand the world and are invited to conduct our lives, and for the way we relate to each other and to the whole creation. It is about God who continues reaching out for the sake of justice, peace, and reconciliation. This should be the focus of the Reformation anniversary.

The question of the adequate approach toward the anniversary has been debated intensively within the Lutheran World Federation during the last two years.

In June, 2013, a Special Committee, which included representatives from all seven regions of the LWF, delivered its final report to the LWF Council. That report recommended three overall principles to be observed in preparing for the anniversary in 2017:

Reformation as a global citizen: The celebrations of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation must include a global perspective, and it is crucial that the perspective of minority situations is not overlooked. It is vital that we not merely look back at our theological heritage, but also at the way in which the evangelical insights of the Reformation gradually unfolded in different settings and were embraced in different situations and epochs, enriching this movement and turning it into a global communion.

Ecumenical accountability: The approach to the anniversary needs to be ecumenically sensitive and accountable. It constitutes an opportunity to make visible the fruits of the ecumenical processes and achievements. As a Lutheran communion we confess to being part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. Therefore, as we remember with gratefulness the theological heritage of the Reformation, we do not simply celebrate our particularity, but together with Christians of other church traditions we wish to respond to the calling of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior—a calling which we share with our Christian brothers and sisters.

Churches of Reformation are churches in ongoing reformation (*ecclesia semper reformanda est*). We affirm that the church must be open to constant renewal, always seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit in face of contemporary challenges.²

Let us explore these three principles in more detail.

The church in an ongoing process of reform

I will begin with the last of the three principles mentioned. By this principle we want to ensure that, aside from all the necessary historical recollection and study and building on the valuable historic research that is being done, the question of the present significance of the Reformation should remain clearly at the center. The anniversary should not become a time for nostalgia for past times when things supposedly were so much easier and brighter for the church. The issue is about today and, as much as possible, even about tomorrow, and about how that powerful gospel of justification and freedom by grace continues unfolding its power.

Ecumenical accountability

This also explains the second principle of our approach to the Reformation anniversary: we want to commemorate it with a deep sense of ecumenical responsibility. To us in the LWF that means that the churches of the Reformation do not overlook or ignore more recent ecumenical developments. We must not forget one

²See http://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/field/image/Council2013-Report_Special_Cmte_2017.pdf (accessed January 20, 2014).

thing in particular: in the same year as the Reformation quincentenary, the international dialogue between Lutherans and Catholics will mark its fiftieth anniversary.³ There needs to be intentional action to affirm these fifty years. It would be a tragedy if recalling the origins of the Reformation meant that there was no focus on the recent developments in the field of ecumenical understanding and if uncritical references were made to the language of five centuries ago and to descriptions and conflicts that no longer exist in the same form.

The anniversary should not become a time for nostalgia for past times when things supposedly were so much easier and brighter for the church. The issue is about today and, as much as possible, even about tomorrow, and about how that powerful gospel of justification and freedom by grace continues unfolding its power.

Let me illustrate this with two specific examples. In 1999, the Vatican and the LWF signed the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, which placed the debate about the core concerns of the Reformation on a completely new foundation.⁴ We cannot uncritically leave out this important agreement with its important premise that the mutual condemnations expressed at the time on issues related to justification no longer apply. We cannot simply reconnect to the debates of former times as if nothing had happened since. Lutherans have moved on; Catholics have moved on; the world has moved on.

While one might question how much of this theological agreement and its deep insights into justification find actual expression in the pastoral work and practice of our churches (a question for Catholics and Lutherans alike), it wouldn't make sense to ignore the fact that this agreement was reached and that the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification was signed.

During its meeting in June, 2013, the LWF Council received a report from the Lutheran–Roman Catholic International Commission on Unity called “From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran–Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017.”⁵ As the Council did last June, I too want to commend this booklet for your study and discussion. It is the first attempt ever to describe together the events of Reformation at an international level. We know from processes of reconciliation in the secular world, particularly after deeply traumatic

³The Roman Catholic–Lutheran International Commission on Unity was established in 1967 and has since then worked without interruption.

⁴See the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html (accessed January 20, 2014).

⁵*From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran–Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017*, Report of the Lutheran–Roman Catholic Commission on Unity (Leipzig/Paderborn: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt/Bonifatius, 2013) at <http://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/From%20Conflict%20to%20Communion.pdf> (accessed January 20, 2014).

experiences, that healing begins by telling the story and by getting to the point of either allowing the different stories to exist side by side, or better, by finding a common narrative. I sense there is a huge need for healing of memories—and for healing them altogether. And one of the key questions we will have to answer, Catholics and Lutherans alike, is that apparently so superfluous a question that Jesus directed to the sick man at the pool in Jerusalem: “Do you want to be healed?” (John 5:6 RSV). Do we want to be healed? *From Conflict to Communion* is a good resource to understand what happened, how we have moved on, and what still remains an obstacle to unity and therefore a task for ongoing ecumenical dialogue and relationships.

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The other example I want to offer in conjunction with principle of ecumenical accountability is the action toward reconciliation with the Mennonites adopted by the LWF at its last Assembly in Stuttgart (2010).⁶ In this action, the LWF asked forgiveness for tolerating—and even inciting—state violence against those then called Anabaptists and for the distorted description of some of their theological concerns, distortion that has persisted to this day. As churches in the theological tradition of *simul iustus et peccator* we are able to view the Reformation in all its ambivalence. What is more, as churches that hear the gospel from the standpoint of justification by faith alone, we may use the freedom resulting from justification to be released from the compulsion to justify ourselves as we reflect on the Reformation.

Lutheran Reformation: a global citizen

The third principle characterizing the LWF’s approach to the Reformation anniversary brings me to the primary theme of my lecture. We see it as a special task of the Lutheran World Federation to bring in the global dimension of the Lutheran Reformation and to ensure that it is adequately represented. The Lutheran Reformation today is global. It has traveled the world and put down roots in all continents.⁷ Churches have sprung up in which the Reformation message is cultur-

⁶The Lutheran World Federation/The Mennonite World Conference, *Healing Memories: Reconciling in Christ*, Report of the Lutheran–Mennonite International Study Commission (Geneva/Strasbourg: The Lutheran World Federation/Mennonite World Conference, 2010) at http://www.lwf-assembly.org/uploads/media/Report_Lutheran-Mennonite_Study_Commission.pdf (accessed January 20, 2014). As a follow-up, an LWF task force on the Mennonite Action has been formed. See <http://www.lutheranworld.org/content/lutheran-mennonite-dialogue> (accessed January 20, 2014)

⁷Today, the LWF comprises 142 member churches with over 70 million members globally: 19,867,743 members in Africa; 9,020,850 in Asia; 36,353,386 in Europe; 846,432 in Latin America and the Caribbean; and 4,425,685 in North America. See <http://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/LWF-Statistics-2011.pdf> (accessed January 20, 2014).

ally anchored, developed, and supplemented by new, specific perspectives. Moreover, Lutheran Reformation has moved beyond monopolarity (the traditional North Atlantic axis) and is becoming a polycentric construction, where the most varied forms and expressions of being the Lutheran Church can be found. The question is therefore not merely what has emigrated to the wider world from the historical centers of the Reformation, including Germany, the Nordic countries, and, indeed, also the United States. Equally fascinating is the question as to what is immigrating back after such an extensive, ongoing world trip, and how things re-learned or developed elsewhere are coming to shape and enrich the theological discourse and the practice of the churches of the Reformation.

ENCULTURATION: A PHENOMENON TOUCHING EVERY CHURCH

Let me dig deeper into the topic of Reformation and enculturation. First, however, a very important observation: the Reformation in distant sixteenth-century Wittenberg was already itself a massive enculturation process! Luther's theological insight into the predominance of grace draws greatly on the reflections of the northern African church of father Augustine. The move from the northern African city of Thagaste (Augustine's birthplace, now in Algeria) to Rome in Italy, or even from Hippo (Augustine's home and place of death, also in present Algeria) to Wittenberg, is at least as adventurous as that from Wittenberg to Tegucigalpa (Honduras), from Minnesota to Abudja (Nigeria), or from Uppsala to Chennai (India). Gospel and culture—the question is not first raised by the moment churches move from the North to the South.⁸ Instead, the question of gospel and culture comes with the Word incarnated, and hence became an issue already in the early times of the apostles, as they too had to grapple with a gospel so powerful that it began traveling to neighboring regions, then crossing the Mediterranean Sea and taking root in ways that challenged understandings of the church in its Holy Land origins. Hence, if I now mention a few examples of the enculturation of the Reformation worldwide and offer a particular focus on the South, I would like to invite you to use these examples as inspiration to keep on critiquing your own enculturation and contextualization processes.

Incarnation as liberation: a theological discourse from India

Since I just mentioned Chennai, let me take a closer look at that example. The Lutheran Reformation developed its own inimitable profile in Chennai, India, because it took root among the Dalit, the caste of the “untouchables.” Against all expectations, conventions, rules, and laws, these people were seen, approached, and

⁸Lutheran World Federation, *The Gospel Transforming Cultures: Documentation from the 1999 Meeting of the Council of the Lutheran World Federation* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1999). See also, Anita S. Stauffer, ed., *Christian Worship: Unity in Cultural Diversity* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1996); Anita S. Stauffer, ed., *Worship and Culture in Dialogue* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1994); Kenneth Mtata, ed., “*You Have the Words of Eternal Life*”: *Transformative Readings of the Gospel of John from a Lutheran Perspective* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2012).

finally touched.⁹ The touching of the untouchables—that was the description of the mission in India. In the act of baptism, in diaconal ministries, and also in the way some missionaries courageously defended their rights and dignity, the Dalits came to recognize both the truth and the power of the gospel in an impressive way. In the Lord's Supper, they grasp and touch with their own hands how deeply God goes into their bodies and lives. The radical, unconditional love of God, a core concern of the churches in the Reformation tradition, became an identity-creating and liberating message for them—not only through proclamation, but through the body language with which the church encountered people. The church's body language sometimes speaks more than words! And by touching the untouchable, the Lutheran Reformation found a powerful way to speak about God's unconditional love.

Indian theologians reflected about their liberating experience and thereby developed a completely new thought form to interpret God's incarnation in Jesus Christ: on the basis of their experience of being untouchable, they interpret God's incarnation in Jesus Christ as God's very own way of escaping untouchability. God could not and did not want to suffer the pain and isolation of being untouchable; God sought and found the way out of untouchability by becoming human in Jesus Christ, thereby justifying and inspiring the exodus from untouchability experienced by the Dalit people.

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I find this a fascinating thought. The event of incarnation, a core reference point in Lutheran theology, is experienced contextually, far removed from the philosophical categories we still use in a Western theological approach. This interpretation throws a completely different light on incarnation. Here incarnation is interpreted by means of sociology, not philosophy. The implicit challenge brought to classical theology by this sociological approach continues to be colossal, and not only by offering this new, ancillary hermeneutic discipline. Equally important is the far closer connection between proclamation and diakonia that the churches of the global South have been advocating for decades. Moreover, the pointedly political interpretation of the liberating message of Jesus Christ is an important contribution toward working through the traumatic experiences of the early Reformation with regard to the “enthusiasts” and the Peasants' War and the

⁹During my visit to the United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India (UELCI) in February 2011, I was impressed by how alive and meaningful that memory is as church members described their Christian faith and what the Christian faith represents in their lives.

challenges that a narrow interpretation of the theology of the “two kingdoms” still poses regarding the role and task of the church in the public sphere.

To my knowledge no book yet exists that expresses these thoughts about incarnation and hermeneutics. I first heard such thoughts in a group discussion, outside under a huge tree. This fact also describes one of the most difficult methodological challenges needing to be overcome in a polycentric communion of churches. While some enculturation processes are reflected on in writing, others are assimilated through narrative, written into the book of impressive life journeys. Do we have any communication processes and aids at all to connect these differing approaches to theological discourse? Are there any ways of removing the implicit asymmetry prevailing until now between written and narrative approaches? I come to you with a simple, but urgent, call for help: let us work on promoting symmetrical relations in which theological conversation takes place on an equal footing, and let us develop for that purpose the urgently needed skills for trans-contextual and transcultural theological dialogue.

Eucharist as the feast of inclusion

This brings me to reflect on how Holy Communion is understood, conducted, and experienced in other contexts. Sometimes, in global events held by the LWF, I notice rather astonished or perplexed expressions on the faces of some participants in Holy Communion. This is because the celebration is, admittedly, sometimes rather lively and noisy for those who come from a tradition of a sober, silent, and rather contrite approach to Eucharist. I recall my own time as a pastor in Chile, where I served in a very poor, marginalized congregation.¹⁰ The moment of sharing the peace before communion seemed never ending. Everyone had to be greeted, embraced, and kissed. Members of the congregation stood in groups and told stories and laughed, winking mischievously to each other. As the pastor I often had to discreetly remind them that the sharing of peace is actually only one liturgical element, a step on the way to communion. But I soon understood that for these people, so lastingly marked by daily exclusion and marginalization, Holy Communion had become a festival of inclusion, of unconditional acceptance and of the overcoming of structures of marginalization. Naturally, then, everyone needed to be greeted! People who otherwise had to struggle and fight for everything intuitively grasped the immeasurable gift given to the people of God in Holy Communion. The group of the “damned of the earth” is at the same time the community of those accepted by God, and Holy Communion is a key place to both receive and claim this new sense of citizenship.

Eucharistic hospitality in times of fragmentation and exclusion

Where inclusion is at the core of the celebration of the Eucharist, the question about existing separations at the Lord’s Table arises with renewed vehemence and

¹⁰From 1989 to 1995, I served in the Congregation El Buen Samaritano of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Chile, on the outskirts of the capital city of Santiago.

urgency. These separations are diametrically opposed to the theological insight and spiritual experience of people in situations of marginalization and exclusion. It simply makes no sense to them that the Eucharist, as the single ray of hope for overcoming structural marginalization, should itself become an instance of separation.

That highlights one of the greatest theological challenges that the ecumenical conversation faces today: its necessary and urgent embedding in the pastoral and diaconal service of the church. I know the theological arguments for this separation. The body language conveyed through this separation, however, undermines a key message of God's mission as expressed in Jesus Christ. Teaching and gestures fall apart and leave a deep, painful wound in the body of Christ. In Jesus' time, this very conflict between the teaching and the gesture was regularly an issue—often Jesus had to resort to gestures so that people could still enjoy fellowship together and with God, despite teaching that seemed to exclude certain people and groups from that fellowship. It was similar with the apostles, who lost no opportunity to visit one another, to receive and encourage each other in their witness. The apostolicity of the church, on which we have worked so hard in our international ecumenical dialogues, including the doctrinal dialogues between the Vatican and the LWF,¹¹ seems to me an essential concept to advance our efforts to accept and express our God-given unity in Christ. But I want to advocate for an expanded concept of apostolicity. Apostolicity is measured not just in the doctrinal content and truths of faith; it proves itself also in the telling sign of hospitality. For the apostles, both their ongoing struggle for truth and their ongoing hospitality despite difference belonged together. Let me put it in this short, probably challenging sentence, which I believe could be an important approach in our ongoing journey to receive the gift of unity: a more of hospitality is also a more of apostolicity!

THE CHALLENGE OF PLAUSIBILITY: THE CHURCH IN CURRENT TIMES

Let me turn now to a different dimension, one that coincides with the third of the three guiding principles for our Reformation anniversary and that places the emphasis on the contemporary questions for the church.

In other venues, particularly in those where LWF member churches have a long history, I have been speaking of the "plausibility context of the church." Behind this concept is the observation that in many contexts today, churches are confronted with the challenge of their own plausibility. I'm not talking here about theological plausibility: as long as God is confessed as a God in mission to the entire creation, the church is, in theological terms, plausible.¹² I'm referring rather to the social, political, and religious context in which churches find themselves today.

¹¹The Lutheran World Federation/Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *The Apostolicity of the Church: Study Document of the Lutheran–Roman Catholic Commission on Unity* (Minneapolis, MN: Lutheran University Press, 2006).

¹²See the LWF Mission Document, *Mission in Context—Transformation, Reconciliation and Empowerment* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2004).

For many of the LWF member churches (not only in Europe and North America, but also in Africa, Asia, and Latin America), life is changing rapidly, leading to a situation where many things can't be taken for granted anymore. For churches in the Nordic countries, for instance, these changes have been so profound that they are reflected even in recent changes regarding the legal framework under which they operate and which, in some cases, dated back centuries. For churches in Africa, in particular, but also all over the world, there is a complex process of increased secularization on the one hand, particularly in big cities, and the resurgence of religious expression and institutions on the other hand. During the last leadership conference of LWF member churches in Africa in May 2013, considerable time was spent discussing charismatic movements, also within the churches, and in particular the so-called "prosperity gospel" that seems to be persistently knocking at their doors.¹³

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Lutheran Reformation in times of commodification—not for sale!

It is on the basis of this specific discussion that the Special Committee proposed a very interesting thematic approach. Focusing on the bold and strong "It is not for sale!" that Luther stressed in the context of his disputes over the practice of indulgences in the sixteenth century, the committee proposes a threefold "not for sale" in today's world:

1. Salvation is not for sale
2. Human beings are not for sale
3. Creation is not for sale

This is a strong and, in my view, pertinent contextualization and adaptation of one of the core concerns of Lutheran Reformation. This threefold "not for sale" not only reconnects to that protest of Reformation times, it also particularly challenges the contemporary obsession with commodifying almost everything. Then, five centuries ago, the protest related to salvation and was directed against the practice of using indulgences to make money off of the despair of people needing evidence and security of salvation. Today, the protest refers to prosperity and a variety of theologies and practices that are again making impressive cash off of a gift that is not to be marketed. "Not for sale" is therefore not a nostalgic reframing of old disputes of the sixteenth century. Instead, it is a way to address one of the issues at stake today: the

¹³The LWF offered a first approach to charismatic renewal within the church through a consultation on renewal movements in the Lutheran churches in North and South, Moshi, Tanzania, 9–12 June 2002. The publication, Carter Lindberg's *Charismatic Renewal and the Lutheran Tradition* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1985), is also an important basis for further work on this very important topic.

commodification of the despair and the longing for wholeness, relationship, and healing of billions of people in our world. This despair and longing is what calls the church into business, but this business can be nothing other than a deep, loving pastoral and diaconal accompaniment for God's sake. It is my deepest prayer that the anniversary of Reformation would strengthen churches around the world to respond to the suffering of people and the groaning of creation.

the Reformation anniversary is an opportunity to claim what I like to call the “citizenship” of the church in the global public sphere—a responsible citizenship, deeply shaped by the Lutheran understanding of the role of faith and religion, which participates in the public debate and collective efforts of the human family to address current crises and worrying scenarios of the future

Reformation anniversary and interfaith dimensions

The “Not for sale!” calls the church into the public space to join the efforts and the struggle of the human family to overcome situations of alienating injustice and massive destruction. The Reformation anniversary is an opportunity to claim what I like to call the “citizenship” of the church in the global public sphere—a responsible citizenship, deeply shaped by the Lutheran understanding of the role of faith and religion, which participates in the public debate and collective efforts of the human family to address current crises and worrying scenarios of the future. A poet of your country, apparently a very visionary and prophetic one, wrote sixty years ago:

Man has survived hitherto
Because he was too ignorant to know
How to realize his wishes.
Now that he can realize them,
He must either change them
Or perish.¹⁴

I haven't found a better, more concise way of describing the huge challenge facing the human family than these words. In fact, the financial and the ecological crises are two sides of the same coin; they reveal in a poignant way that the problem today is about our wishes and their unsustainable nature. Both the financial and the ecological crises are expressions of human wish to live from resources, financial and ecological, that do not exist.

I am afraid that this challenge won't be addressed only by finding ways to reengineer financial markets and ecological systems. Rather, I believe tackling this challenge will require a deep process of transformation with regard to the wishes

¹⁴William Carlos Williams, “The Orchestra,” in *The Desert Music and Other Poems* (New York: Random House, 1954) 15.

that shape our lifestyles, cultures, and relationships today. This, in turn, is a matter that relates to ultimate questions regarding the meaning and the values in life and becomes therefore a deep spiritual issue.

It is my firm conviction that there is a role for the church, but also for religions more broadly, in contributing and supporting the efforts of the human family to get back to a track of sustainability in our world. It is my own experience that this voice and contribution is insistently sought by leaders of governments, the United Nations, and sometimes also business companies.

To accomplish this, however, the religions will have to learn how to share the public arena and how they might work together in response to these important challenges. Unfortunately, the emergence of particular religious expressions in our times and the increasingly multireligious character of societies has sometimes come with a fierce struggle for control of the public space. In some places, attacks on religious buildings or fights over legislation framing the expression of faith are evidence of these struggles. It is a quest for hegemony, up to the point of theocratic constructions of government (by the way, not only on the side of other religions, but sometimes also within Christianity).

In Indonesia, where things remain complex and difficult, we as the LWF, together with Muslim communities, began to learn something new in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami. Christians and Muslims alike found themselves digging for their neighbors, rubbing elbows and bodies as they frantically looked for survivors in the mud. That very situation produced a significant shift in relationships, providing mutual understanding and new ways to relate to each other in view of their shared faith-based commitment to the suffering neighbor. Diapaxis is the key word, not as an alternative to dialogue, but as a context for it.¹⁵

The LWF has worked with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees on an interfaith meeting—the first ever in the UNHCR—to discuss the role of religions in protecting migrants and refugees. The Bible has plenty of resources, as do the Qur'an and other sacred texts. "Welcoming the Stranger: An Affirmation of Faith Leaders"¹⁶ is the document resulting from this process, which the LWF Council received last June and commended for reception among member churches. Among other things, the document refers to the commitment of faith leaders to uphold the principle of religious freedom—something that still seems to be hard to achieve in many world contexts.

Coming back to the "plausibility context," it is more than evident to me that

¹⁵The experience of the tsunami triggered an important process of interfaith discussion. The LWF seminar on "Dialogue in Life" held in Medan, Indonesia, in June 2006 was considered a most valuable experience in this regard. A report of the consultation "Dialogue in Life" is available from LWF Asia Desk. The process concluded with a regional consultation on "Diapaxis." The LWF has been following up on this contribution from the Asian region and has promoted that concept at a global level. See Kjell Nordstokke, ed., *Serving the Whole Person: The Practice and Understanding of Diakonia within the Lutheran Communion* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2009), which offers important contributions in this regard.

¹⁶See the UNHCR High Commissioner's dialogue on Faith and Protection of December 2012 from Geneva, at http://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Welcoming_the_Stranger.pdf (accessed January 20, 2014).

it is impossible to think of a Reformation anniversary without a strong interfaith perspective. Many things have been done already. At its Assembly in 1984, the LWF apologized for the anti-Jewish expressions of Martin Luther, particularly late in his life.¹⁷ Work will have to be done now regarding the way Luther spoke about the “Turks.” There is ambivalence there: I was surprised to learn that Luther strongly endorsed the publication of the Qur’an by a publisher in Basel, Switzerland.¹⁸ No question about burning that sacred book, as was planned only few years ago by an individual pastor in this country. “Publish it” was his advice in the early 1530s. But there are also those other references to the “Turks” that do not help and should not frame the understanding out of which we would want to relate today to Islam.

Let me return to my beginning narrative about the sun that rises, even, one might say, despite the crowing of that rooster. It is about grace, dear sisters and brothers, about free and overflowing grace. Yes, the world has moved on, and indeed, five hundred years is a long time span. And there is today an abundance of things that were unimaginable five centuries ago. But abundance of grace—as God wants it to shape our relationships with ourselves, the neighbor, and the creation—remains scarce. Because of that scarcity, therefore, and responding to the initial question about the relevance of Lutheran Reformation let me finalize by repeating: Reformation anniversary? Yes, it matters! ☩

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¹⁷Wolfgang 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* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2003); Gerhardt M. Riegner, “The Church and the Jewish People,” in *In Christ Hope for the World*, Budapest 1984, Proceedings of the Seventh Assembly (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1985) 144.

¹⁸Cf. Johannes Ehmann, “Martin Luther and Islam,” in *Deepening Faith, Hope and Love in Relations with Neighbors of Other Faiths*, ed. Simone Sinn (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2008) 26.