



# Leadership Wisdom from the Global Church: a Journey of Accompaniment

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**M**y first lesson in leadership from the global church began in 1999 at an international consultation on Diakonia which began in Lilongwe, Malawi and culminated in Johannesburg, South Africa. I have been blessed to be part of the work of the Lutheran World Federation, A Communion of Churches, since that first visit. It has been a privilege to explore the work of service and justice with leaders from the global communion in places like Medan, Indonesia; Nairobi,

*Two Lutheran leaders, one from Africa, the other from the United States, reflect here on their experiences in the global church, and on those who have provided guidance and wisdom for them. They have encountered models of leadership from many different sources and regions, creating power for the future flourishing of the church.*

Kenya including at the three General Assemblies of the Lutheran World Federation in Stuttgart, Germany, 2010; Windhoek, Namibia, 2017 and Krakow, Poland, 2023. Leaders from places including Bogota, Columbia; Santiago, Chile; Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; Jerusalem, Israel; Amman, Jordan; Sao Paulo, Brazil, and so many more locations around the globe, continue to be formative for my thinking about leadership.

From the title of this essay, you may think I was the one accompanying but in fact, I was the one who needed and still needs accompaniment. I have been graciously hosted, coached, welcomed, helped to belong and guided by wiser folks from the global Lutheran Communion. One of those leaders from whom I have learned so much is the Rev. Dr. Jeannette Ada Maina. She currently is the only ordained Lutheran woman with a Ph.D. in the country of Cameroon. We met seven years ago in Windhoek, Namibia, when we were both elected to serve on the LWF Executive Committee, Jeannette as Vice President for the Africa Region and me as chair of the Committee on Theology and Public Witness, later the Committee on Ecumenical Relations.

In this essay, we will share stories of places and people who have been guides along the way and the leadership wisdom they have shared which continues to shape the way we think about the leadership gifts, skills, and charisms needed for the future flourishing of the Church. Our prayer is that we might all cultivate spaces for sharing stories which point to the belonging which comes to us as a gift in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. This belonging to God overflows, creating generosity and belonging with those whom we may not know or understand and to whom we may seem a strange and odd people. We will share four signposts along a journey of learning which inform our leadership.

## LEARNING TO LISTEN DEEPLY

In June of 2012, the LWF Council was meeting in Bogota, Columbia. It was a common practice when the Council met that Council members were invited to preach at local congregations. I always volunteered and sometimes had the privilege to preach. My lack of fluency in the other three LWF languages (German, Spanish, and French) required translation in many places. Bishops and other

heads of churches would often preach at the host church, or close to where the Council was staying. Council members like me, a pastor, academic dean and subsequently a seminary president, were often sent to places far away, on the edge of the city or in the countryside. I treasured the chances to see more of the work of the church in places far from where we stayed.

In Bogota, I was invited to preach at San Pablo Lutheran Church. I was notified a couple of months in advance so had plenty of time to prepare a sermon on the assigned text, Mark 4: 26–34. I submitted my manuscript several weeks in advance and eagerly waited for the adventure. Once in Bogota, I was given detailed instructions on how to take public transportation to San Pablo along with Ms. Deuss, the seasoned expert, United Nations and LWF Senior translator who would translate my carefully crafted sermon. As we waited at the street corner for the public bus to arrive, Ms. Deuss asked what I was going to preach. I dutifully produced my manuscript for her and rather than read it, she simply asked what I wanted to say. We began a deep conversation about these parables, the themes, the realities of the lives of the folks living in the tin shacks clinging to the hillside with whom we would share the word, and the life and death situations they faced each time the rains came and washed away the pieces of tin pushed hard into the side of the mountain which served as their only physical shelter. Ms. Deuss brilliantly continued to press me about what God was doing, invited more conversation and kept asking, “what do you mean by this theological phrase or idea,” despite how self-evident I thought my explanation was. She shared how an idea, example, or theme I was preaching about would be heard by this congregation of the economically poor, scratching out an existence on the edge of the city. She explained how relationally rich they were, how much they loved the community and each other, the ways they would welcome us, and that they would be eager to hear what the word of God had for them that day. Together we crafted a different sermon, still rooted in the text but through the lived experiences of the people of San Pablo she knew so well.

After our three-hour journey to San Pablo, a second-floor house church, adjacent to the hillside where the tin shacks peppered the hillside, the room was overflowing with folks eagerly waiting for our arrival. I was seated and waiting for the pastor to begin the service. From across the room a little girl, about nine or ten years old, marched

across the crowded room and sat beside me. She noticed that I wasn't conversing in Spanish and she was going to help me through the service by pointing to each part of the service in the bulletin and telling me when to stand or sit. This little evangelist powered me through the tricky bits.

When it came time for the sermon, Ms. Deuss stood shoulder to shoulder with me and we began to preach, without a note, only the text and the seeds we cultivated together in conversation over our three-hour sojourn. I took a deep breath and began. I sensed when she took a deep breath, it was time for her to translate. We continued with this handing off of each deep breath trusting that the Holy Spirit would stir. Never before or since have I had such a powerful experience of the presence of the Holy Spirit, not because of anything I said or did, but because somewhere in the midst of the translation, the Spirit was powerful in that place and through those people.

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What I did not know at the time was another important part of the story. The next summer at the LWF Council meeting, I noticed an agenda item that read something like a "memorial moment." At the appointed time in the agenda, staff shared that Ms. Deuss had died of cancer several months earlier. Her son came to Geneva so the Council could pay tribute to this extraordinary translator who so faithfully served both the United Nations and the LWF for many decades. He shared that the Bogota trip was the last one she was able to do and she continued to talk about that preaching experience and how much it helped her reconcile so many questions about faith and life she had over the years. Theology matters. It matters to take the time to listen deeply with others what God is doing and discern together the impact on God's beloved children. That day was not about me or my sermon. It was about listening deeply to the questions of others, being

accompanied by a nine-year-old evangelist, seeing in awe only in retrospect, what God through the power of the Holy Spirit was stirring.

### LEARNING TO EXPECT GOD'S PRESENCE

Enroute to Suriname for a Latin America and North American regional leadership meeting, I had nearly a day long layover in the Trinidad and Tobago International airport. I took a taxi to the city center and just wandered around. I walked by a large wooden frame house with rickety steps leading to an expansive front porch. The white paint was peeling and there was a very large hand painted sign adjacent to the porch. It read: "Church of All Miracles: worship every evening 7:00 pm, miracles on Sunday 9:30am." I laughed at this congregation's ability to predict when miracles would happen. Then again, I wondered if, when the congregation showed up on Sunday morning, they actually expected something to happen. I pondered how many times I showed up at church expecting something to happen. I'd like to say every week, sadly, it is far less often. Since that journey, rarely do I experience a worship service without wondering where God is at work in miraculous ways that have been oblivious to me in the past. I wonder what it could mean for the renewal of our life in Christ if together, we expected God to be present, to show up across the divides and polarities within which we find ourselves? I wonder if we could trust that Christ is present in and through those for whom it is so easy to see as "other"? I wonder how God could transform our present reality and our hope for a flourishing future if we expected that God was present in and through the deepest struggles and hardest circumstances?

### LEARNING TO WONDER AND EXPERIENCE JOY IN THE MIDST OF CHALLENGE

Have you ever been certain of something and it turned out to be the opposite of what you thought? Several years ago, I was with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania (ELCT) to bring greetings for the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. The ELCT rented the football stadium, otherwise known as soccer in Minnesota. The stadium was in the Dar es Salaam city center with seating

for, I think, 40,000 or more. Thousands and thousands arrived from all over Tanzania in buses, on bicycles and horse drawn carts, or walking. Everyone was dressed in festive attire with many choirs adorned in colorful robes. I was grateful the clouds were thick to shield us from the heat of the day.

In addition to celebrating the reformation, the plan was also to confirm 2,000 young people that day. You know how it is, you plan to confirm 2,000 kids and 5,000 show up. It took a little longer than expected to get lined up in this procession of thousands and enter the stadium. The service began a bit later than scheduled and the choir members walked into the stadium first followed by the young people who were to be confirmed, then the pastors, the bishops, and the guests. Just as those of us near the end of the queue were ready to enter the stadium, the heavens opened up and it began to rain. I don't mean the typical summer rains we experience in Minnesota; I mean a sustained monsoon, a deluge of the kind where you can hardly see the person next to you. That deluge quickly swamped the dirt track surrounding the grass field and turned into ankle deep mud, splattering mud waist high on white albs and brilliantly colored choir robes. I thought to myself, what a disaster. Surely, they will stop so we can take cover. We continued to process. Sparks were flying from the exposed electrical wires used to power the microphone and amplifiers on the metal stage. The canvas cover above the stage, used to keep the sun off of the participants, was heavy with water. We continued to process. We climbed the metal steps onto the stage. One of the volunteers scrambled up the metal pole and with a small pocket knife, sliced through the canvas to let the water gush out so the entire stage did not topple. I sensed this was an unfolding disaster, and I seemed to be the only person who was alarmed.

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To my astonishment, the procession continued. There was animated dancing, even more exuberant singing to "drown out" the

deluge. When we were in our seats, soaked and mud splattered, the presiding Bishop Alex Malasusa, declared that this deluge was a sign of God's blessing. He proclaimed how wonderful that the heavens opened and a monsoon descended so that God's blessings would wash over us all in equal measure. I have never heard Psalm 19 "the heavens declare the glory of God" or experienced a rainstorm in the same way again. Not long after the procession ended, the sun peeked out and the service continued for hours. I learned something about the importance to wonder what is unfolding and persevere rather than rush to judgment and assume what the situation requires. I learned something about seeing the joy of God through the eyes of others. My "I know" was transformed into "I wonder" not by my doing but by God's work through the wisdom of the community that welcomed me and showed me how to dance through the rain and the mud.

#### LEARNING TO SEE THE LYDIAS

Recently the Global LWF Scholarship recipients gathered on Zoom for a series of conversations on leadership. These are church leaders mostly from Africa and Asia who are continuing their education and engaging in global conversations on leadership. I was invited to host one of the sessions and invited two colleagues from the global communion to join me in leading the discussion, the Rev. Dr. Jeanette Ada Maina and Dr. Michael Chan. At one point during our three hour zoom session, we invited the scholarship holders to listen deeply to the Acts 16: 9–15 story of Lydia. Paul has a vision that a man from Macedonia is pleading with him to come to Macedonia and help. Paul and his companions concluded that God had called them to evangelize Macedonia. They went to look for this Macedonian man and through a circuitous journey Paul unexpectedly encounters Lydia.

It was the Sabbath day and Paul and his companions got off their boat and looked for a house of prayer. There, not far from the river, they found women gathered together and Paul sat in their midst and talked to them. A woman named Lydia, a merchant of purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, a God-fearing woman, listened attentively to what Paul was saying. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. She was baptized with her household. Considering

herself a member of God's family, she urged Paul come into her house and stay there.

The apostle Paul, a man, was invited to come to the house of a woman, a head of the house. Lydia broke the cultural taboo which considers women unfit to lead the faith or incapable of doing the work of God or of receiving a man of God into their home. Her ability to convince Paul, shifted Paul's agenda. Paul follows her leadership and liberates Lydia and women from the yoke of the law by entering into Lydia's house. Lydia got her place in God's family, and she participated in the grace of God through Jesus Christ.

Lydias today are found throughout the community and therefore, I, Reverend Dr. Jeanette Ada Maina, am a Lydia. The story of God's grace for me is so numerous that I cannot tell it all. But I share with you a story, not the most important but because they all shaped my life and my relationship with God and changed the course of history for a number of people.

I was working in a Christian organization, and this organization was to hold its General Assembly in a town in Northern Cameroon. In the northern part of Cameroon, the Muslim religion is dominant with their law, which considers women unfit to proclaim the word of God. In the program of this meeting, the preacher at the opening worship, was the bishop of my church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Cameroon (EELC), the Rev. Dr. Ngozo Ruben, of late memory. But, unable to participate in this meeting, he asked me to replace him to preach at the opening service of the General Assembly. I did not refuse because I am a pastor; although, it is in a Muslim context, which also impacted the way Christians understood the role of women in leadership.

Like Lydia, I was convinced that I was a full member of the God's family. I was the servant called by God to preach and to serve, and I was convinced that like any male pastor, I was not of lesser importance. Counting on God who called me and who promised not to leave me alone, I gathered my strength, my courage and with faith I accepted to confront the looks and discriminating words of men in this patriarchal context.

When the time came to prepare for the opening service, all the pastors met in the sacristy to wear the priestly vestments. It is important to note that, in this context, I was the only woman pastor, and,



therefore, in the gathered assembly of this opening service of the General Assembly, I was the only woman pastor.

Worried about who should preach because of the absence of Bishop Ngozo, the General Secretary asked who will preach? To this question, I told him that I was chosen by my bishop to represent him and to preach, although I was a member of this hierarchical structure. It was almost a scandal for many of the pastors who were there. "How can they let a woman preach in such an important context?" They had no choice, because I had been mandated by my Bishop to preach and I was duty bound to preach. By the grace of God, the message got through.

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After the service, debates opened not around the preaching but about the preacher who is a woman. Some did not find this bad but others were scandalized by the fact that a woman had taken to the pulpit of this church, which did not accept women to pray or read the scriptures at these times. For the first time, the floor was given to a woman in this church, it was not to read the scriptures, nor to pray, but to preach. Because it was the gatherings of the Protestant churches, some chiefs of villages and authorities of the town were present. It was a big challenge for the church in front of its notables, elites, and elders. Those who attended the service were divided. Some appreciated the preaching and others engaged in trivializing sexist discrimination. This means that in this church, there are those who support the ministry of women despite being in a predominantly Muslim area. For others, it is a scandal based on the discriminatory interpretation of the words of the apostle Paul who commanded women to be silent in all assemblies (1 Corinthians 14:34). But, the happy result of my presence in pastoral robes and my courageous acceptance to preach was the opening of this sister church to the training of women in theology.

The General Assembly of this Church, just after this event, decided to open pastoral training to women: And I say AMEN.

Because of the grace in Jesus Christ, Lydia changed the discriminatory and sexist culture by changing Paul's agenda, who had not planned to meet or stay at Lydia's house but did it. The agenda of the general Assembly was planned to get a male bishop preacher. But it happened that it's a woman who preached, and this has changed the history of this sister church who can't say that a woman never climbed to their pulpit to preach. The taboo is broken for this sister church. With Christ, all things are possible to all who believe. I thank God for that.

## CONCLUSION

Many years ago in the Lutheran World Federation, the global communion of churches formed after the Second World War, and a powerful leadership vision emerged. The late Tanzanian Bishop Josiah Kibira, LWF President from 1977–1984, cast a vision for the LWF that has been repeated in so many LWF gatherings, I have lost count. It is in the LWF regular practices to invoke Bishop Kibira, and often his words have been internalized by the speaker, and so are often nuanced when he said: there is no church, so big and so rich, that it wouldn't depend on the gifts of others; there is no church so small and so poor it wouldn't be able to enrich others. Sometimes he is quoted as saying: no church is so large it doesn't need to receive the gifts of a small church; no church is so small it doesn't have gifts to share.

The leadership wisdom we have shared from our global encounters is a strong reminder of the power of the Holy Spirit who is leading and stirring through people and in places one may least expect. We are connected to the living God to be curious and say, "I wonder" and be empowered by the Spirit to try something new. Our call as churches is to continue the journey of accompaniment to listen deeply, expect God's presence, dance through the rain and mud and see the Lydias. ☩

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