



One Hope—What it is Today for the Lutheran World Federation Community

JERZY SOJKA

The theme of hope has accompanied the General Assemblies of the Lutheran World Federation in Central Europe. The first assembly in this region of the world, in 1984 in Budapest, deliberated around the theme *In Christ—Hope for the World*.¹ In September 2023, the communion of global Lutheranism met in Krakow, Poland, around the Ephesians 4:4-inspired theme: *One Body, One Spirit, One Hope*. It is the notion of hope in the deliberations of the Krakow General

¹ Cf. “*In Christ—Hope for the World*”: *Official Proceedings of the Seventh Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation. Budapest, Hungary July 22-August 5, 1984*,” (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1984).

In 2023 the Lutheran World Federation met in Krakow, Poland, and the theme for this meeting was One Body, One Spirit, One Hope. This article explores the way in which this theme was explored, both in the materials and meetings leading up to the meeting, and in the meeting itself. The meeting urged the development of a communion of hope.

Assembly of the LWF that we want to look at in this article. We will do so in four steps. First, we will focus on the *Assembly Study Guide*, that is, the material that served as the starting point for reflection on the theme of the Assembly, prepared at the LWF Communion Office with the cooperation of a group of theologians representing all seven geographic regions of the Federation. It was the subject of reflection both in Krakow and at earlier regional preassemblies held in the first half of 2023 in Oxford (the three European regions), Bogota (the Americas region), Nairobi (Africa) and Kuala Lumpur (Asia). It is the regional preassemblies, as well as the preassemblies taking place immediately before Krakow for women in Wroclaw, for youth in Wisla Malinka and, for the first time in the history of LWF preassembly for men in Krakow, that we will address in step two. In step three, we will look at how the issue of hope resonated in the proceedings of the assembly in a keynote by Tomáš Halík, a Czech Roman Catholic priest, as well as a thematic day on *One Hope* in a Gerson Acker Bible study, a keynote on *One Hope* by Archbishop em. Antje Jackelén (Sweden) and responses from Bishop Pavlo Schwartz (Ukraine) and Katarina Kuhnert (Canada). Finally, in step four, we will look at the *Message of the Krakow assembly*.

In 2023 the Lutheran World Federation met in Krakow, Poland, and the theme for this meeting was One Body, One Spirit, One Hope. This article explores the ways in which this theme was explored, both in the materials and meetings leading up to the meeting, and in the meeting itself. The meeting urged the development of a communion of hope.

The assembly *Study Guide* begins its discussion of *One Hope*² by pointing out that hope is one of the three theological virtues (cf. 1 Cor 13), and attempts to define it: “Hope is the affirmation that God is faithful, that God will complete what God has begun. Hope is, therefore, the confident expectation and active waiting for God’s

² *Study Guide: LWF Thirteenth Assembly Kraków, Poland 13–19 September 2023* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2023), 43–50.

purposes to be fulfilled and the capacity to strive for what must be altered, amended, and rectified to realize that promise ‘on earth as it is in heaven’ (Matt 6:10).³ It contains elements that will resonate later in the assembly’s further deliberations. First, pointing to God as the source, as the One who ensures that hope has meaning and substance. Second, hope as an expectation of God. Third, hope as participation.

Understood in this way, the concept of hope becomes the starting point for considering *Cries of despair*, looking through *Eyes to see*, and finally concluding in thanksgiving. Among the cries concerning hope, it was pointed out that it is limited, that it can quickly turn into hopelessness, while pointing out that many examples of this can be found in earlier assembly *Study Guide* analyses of unity, the body, and the Spirit. The assembly *Study Guide* identifies the sources of this hopelessness in the denial of God’s image in man and God’s intentions for all of creation. People enslaved to various ideologies destroy God’s intentions. Expanding on this track, the authors point to such problems as market mentality or the gap between rich and poor, which intensified during the Covid-19 pandemic. The *Study Guide* points out that there are many unestablished laws and regulations in society to protect this state of injustice, such as beliefs inherent in the concept of trickle down economy. This also translates into theological reflection in the form of Prosperity Gospel. Such ideological beliefs provide opportunities for the powerful to consolidate their power. This leads to enslavement (human trafficking and slave trade), leads to wars in the name of national or cultural interests. It leads to the cries of migrants—victims of war or climate crisis that are harbored in the name of the dominance of a single narrative that reasserts oppression, seeing dominion over the earth as a task for humans, even though in the biblical creation story “dominion over the earth” (Gen 1:26–28) means responsibility “to till and keep” the earth (Gen 2:15). Similarly, the oppressive single story justified European Christian discovery and the process of colonization. Elements of it are constantly present in the theology and action of the churches. And history shows that Lutherans have also been involved in its promotion to the great detriment of indigenous peoples. The example cited is the American residential schools with their program to “kill the Indian in the child” through education. The systemic persecution of diversity applies to indigenous peoples, but is also strictly related to

³ *Study Guide*, 43.

the place the assembly visited—Auschwitz-Birkenau, as well as other sites of genocide on earth. Another element of cries in the context of hope is the effects of the climate crisis with its induced eco-anxiety or climate grief. The desire for domination in individuals and communities is identified in the *Study Guide* as a manifestation of the Lutheran understanding of sin as being *incurvatus in se*, which places the human self as the essential point of reference. Reference was also made in this context to Bonhoeffer's thought from his *Life Together*, which closely linked self-justification with judging. This combination results in the objectification of another for one's own ends. The tyranny of a single narrative has also not escaped Scripture itself, as exemplified by the theory of its verbal inspiration, which broke the Reformation's dynamic view of Scripture interpretation. Today, in the name of this single narrative, attempts are being made to suppress contextual readings of Scripture, overlooking the dynamic nature of Law and Gospel recognition in the text. In this context, the incarnation, which took place in a specific place and time, is recalled. In turn, this should make us sensitive to how variously God is embodied in our neighbors. This section of the *Study Guide* on hope concludes with a call to break one narrative and decolonize our thinking, and a call to communion expressed in the words of Psalm 140:9–13.

The *Eyes to See* section, conceived as a place to gather theological inspiration that can help work with what was shown in the cries section, begins with a call to be a church of hope because of the work of the Holy Spirit. It just begins by pointing to the rooting of hope among the gifts of the Holy Spirit and in the promise spoken from outside. Hope, then, is based on none other than Christ, who speaks words of promise and liberation for all creation. Scripture attests to God's liberating work already in Israel's history. The prophetic biblical tradition carries a message of liberation from all oppressive powers. Thus, biblically, hope is firmly rooted in the covenant relationship with God. It becomes a reality for the individual in Baptism, understood as the present reality of every Christian, as a constant call forward that liberates us from self-determination of our goals and to God's life. The new beginning of Baptism calls for discipleship, understood as the practice of hope, based in trust in the certainty of God's promise and the constant presence of God's love. This baptismal vocation is realized in the communion, which in worship is formed to be Christians in thanksgiving

and lament, in being recipients of hope, and in building communion through the ministry of reconciliation to serve our neighbor.

In this context, the *Study Guide* returns to the Letter to the Ephesians and the conviction contained therein that the Holy Spirit leads all things to their fulfillment in communion. Therefore, its important theme is a liberating hope that recognizes and affirms diversity. Christian hope is not just positive optimism, but the realization of God's immeasurable goodness. It has its eschatological dimension. It is realized already, but not yet fully. The explanation of the request for the coming of the Kingdom of God from Luther's *Small catechism* is also cited in this context. The realization of what we ask for in it has already begun in baptism, into which we are immersed with nothing and emerge with everything—our identity in God. Hope is not only the promise of liberation in God, but also the overcoming of all evil powers in Christ at the end of time, so that creation can experience God's goodness without limit. In this context, the theology of the cross is invoked as calling things by their name and speaking the words of promise and hope in their context. This directs to the notion of righteous anger in the face of injustice. This section of the *Study Guide* ends with a reference to the famous quote about planting an apple tree in the face of the end of the world attributed to Luther. It's an expression of trust in God's creative, reconciling and restorative work to make his Kingdom come to us as well.

The final section of the *Study Guide* on *One Hope* reaches once again to the concept of righteous anger in the face of injustice in churches and societies. It does so to remind us of the perspective of hope rooted in God's promise, as well as the baptismal call to be participants in God's reconciliation of the world. This happens through worship, preaching, diakonia, humanitarian work, advocacy in the public space, and through ecumenical and interreligious commitment. This section of the *Study Guide* concludes by pointing to the signs of hope present in the life of the LWF churches, understood as the embodiment of the theology of the cross reinterpreted in today's context. The supplement with examples of the activities of the LWF and its member churches, collected under the heading *Seeds of hope*,⁴ harmonizes well with this conclusion of the chapter on hope. These cover various aspects of the LWF's work, from its identity as a communion of churches to its work

⁴ *Study Guide*, 51–54.

for justice in the world, including lessons and examples from the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the face of the various crises marking our times, the European preassembly called for a search for credible and transformative hope, including in the context of the question of Christian discipleship. Hope was also presented as rooting for the experience of being united in one body by one Spirit.

The *Study Guide* inspirations outlined above resonated in different ways at the subsequent preassemblies, as reflected in the *Message* of each. The Preassembly for the three European regions⁵ expressed the expectation that the Krakow assembly would address the question of expressing hope in a suffering world. At the same time, it takes up the *Study Guide* threads that speak of hope as an affirmation of God’s faithfulness or hope as a gift of the Holy Spirit. In the face of the various crises marking our times, the European preassembly called for a search for credible and transformative hope, including in the context of the question of Christian discipleship. Hope was also presented as rooting for the experience of being united in one body by one Spirit. The Preassembly of the Americas regions focused on the contextual realities they are experiencing, calling for “transformation into one body, one spirit, and one living and active hope.”⁶ The Message of the African Preassembly, in commenting on the *One Hope* portion of the assembly’s theme, quoted a speech by General Secretary of the LWF, Rev. Anne Burghardt, “Hope is a gift of the Holy Spirit, and the message of hope is awareness that God creator, redeemer, and sustainer knows and loves all creation. Hope liberates from the powers and principalities of this world and encourages us to move ahead despite

⁵ “Europe Pre-Assembly Oxford, Great Britain, 21–24 March 2023,” in *One Body, One Spirit, One Hope Report of The Thirteenth Assembly. LWF Thirteenth Assembly Kraków, Poland 13–19 September 2023* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2024), 38–40.

⁶ “Latin America And The Caribbean, And North America Pre-Assembly Bogotá, Colombia, 17–21 April 2023,” in *One Body, One Spirit, One Hope Report*, 42.

the many obstacles surrounding us.”⁷ This quote was considered a reminder and an inspiration. The Asian Preassembly⁸ with regard to hope was laconic, seeing the Assembly’s theme as an invitation to deeper theological reflection and commitment in holistic mission.⁹

The women’s pre-assembly made the hope calling to be transformed transformers the frame for the postulates it indicated for the further work of the LWF.¹⁰ Message of the youth preassembly did not focus on analyzing the topic but formulated three specific postulates for the Assembly.¹¹ In contrast, *Message* of the men’s preassembly included a brief analysis of the individual elements of the theme. It reads: “Our hope is in Christ alone. This hope energizes and inspires us. It is a hope not only for humanity, but for God’s creation. We noted many ways in which people look to the church for hope today, affirming how Lutherans across the globe are working to foster peace, support refugees and migrants, create spaces for dialogue and reconciliation, speaking out against injustice and oppression as well as advocating for joint action in climate justice.”¹² This *Message* ends with a part entitled *Expression of hope*, which emphasizes the importance of the men’s pre-assembly, and calls for developing the contributions of all groups (men, women, youth) to the Church and society, and sees hope as a lens for life and a common path to the future.

For the first time in the history of LWF assemblies, the keynote on the assembly’s theme *One Body, One Spirit, One Hope* was delivered by a Roman Catholic priest.¹³ Rev. Tomáš Halík began by invoking Luther and his notion of *sub contrario* and the words to Paul about grace being sufficient for him (cf. 2 Cor 12:9), which are a help in the face of the temptation to lose hope in the darkness of history. In turn, Halík concluded his reflections by pointing to the Spirit, who is

⁷ “Africa Pre-Assembly Nairobi, Kenya, 8–13 May 2023,” in *One Body, One Spirit, One Hope Report*, 42.

⁸ “Asia Pre-Assembly Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 13–19 June 2023,” in *One Body, One Spirit, One Hope Report*, 46–49.

⁹ Cf. lower, footnote 23.

¹⁰ “Women’s Pre-Assembly. Wrocław, Poland, 8–11 September 2023,” in *One Body, One Spirit, One Hope Report*, 49–53.

¹¹ “Youth Pre-Assembly Wisła Malinka, Poland, 8–11 September 2023,” in *One Body, One Spirit, One Hope Report*, 53–56.

¹² “Men’s Pre-Assembly Kraków, Poland, 11–12 September 2023,” in *One Body, One Spirit, One Hope Report*, 57.

¹³ Tomáš Halík, “Keynote Address,” in *One Body, One Spirit, One Hope Report*, 62–72.

constantly creating, animating, and transforming. His action towards creation is accomplished through our faith, hope, and love destroying all walls and divisions. The message of Christianity that Halík spoke of is a message of hope for a world seeking it. A hope that Christians want to share with everyone, which is rooted in the unifying activity of the Spirit. These reflections by Halík are worth supplementing with an exhortation from the response of American theologian Kathryn Lohre,¹⁴ who pointed out that the theme of the assembly describes what we are called to do, and referred to Christ's victory over death as a sufficient basis for our hope.

The day dedicated to hope began with a Bible study by Rev. Gerson Acker (from Brazil) based on Mark 4: 35–41.¹⁵ This well-known story became the starting point to show that there is room for storms in the journey of faith. Acker draws from it not only the message of Jesus as the only hope, but also the necessary stubbornness as part of an attitude of hope. A hope that equips Christians to face whatever threatens them. Acker also invokes Moltmann's intuition of hope as a moving force toward the future. It is a dynamic process that has its beginning in the midst of storms. Jesus's response to the disciples' requests shows that the primary challenge in the situation for them was the loss of control over the situation. Acker sees this as preparing them for their ministry. Being the church is also closely linked to one hope that sustains it. The central event for hope is the resurrection, making hope an expression of faith in the victory of life over death. Acker also rejects reducing hope to optimism, for the latter is based on circumstances, while hope has its foundation in Christ and his grace, even if circumstances contradict it. Acker concludes by pointing to an understanding of hope as the courage of joy and its active character, which results in engagement with the world in a process characterized by constant trying, with a degree of stubbornness.

The key discussion point on hope at the Krakow assembly was the thematic plenary *One Hope*. It opened with her lecture by Antje Jackelén.¹⁶ Jackelén's framework was a polemic against Greta Thunberg's slogan “I don't want you to have hope. I want you to panic!”

¹⁴ Kathryn Lohre, “The ‘Signs of Our Times,’ in *One Body, One Spirit, One Hope Report*, 75–77.

¹⁵ Gerson Acker, “One Hope,” in *One Body, One Spirit, One Hope Report*, 237–239.

¹⁶ Antje Jackelén, “One Hope,” in *One Body, One Spirit, One Hope Report*, 100–107.

Her lecture became an advocacy of Christian hope. She began with a description of the state of the world, marked by the five dangerous P's: polarization, populism, protectionism, post-truth, and patriarchy. She combined this diagnosis with a warning against deceitful hope, hope used and abused whether theologically (e.g., in the prosperity Gospel) or politically (e.g., in the Third Reich). She also pointed out the disappointments that accompany hopes. These, however, must not lead to fatalism, stoicism or apathy, since Christian hope is rooted in the center of the Gospel—the incarnation. Therefore, the place of hope is in the midst of the world in its turmoil. Hope is not a utopia—no place. Answering the question of what hope is, she pointed to several of its characteristics. First, hope as a vocation of Christians. *Dum spiro spero*—hope to the last breath is a characteristic of Christians. It is also vulnerable at the same time, so it is crucial to draw on the Holy Spirit to be hopeful for others. This does not mean that Christians have some super power, but that as Lutherans we know that every gift is also a task. Hope is also not optimism, based on predictions of the continuation of a positive trend, but works against our lack of continuation or breakdowns by putting in the forefront not human failures, but human rights. Secondly, hope is a gift and a virtue.

Hope thinks of the future as an advent, so it is waiting for God while we work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Phil 2:12–13). This fear and trembling applies to the minor hopes. The essential hope of Christianity is pure advent.

Hope as a gift, alongside faith and love. At the same time, as a virtue, it is a choice, subject to exercise and development. It is nourished by the spiritual experience of prayer and confession, singing begging for mercy and praising God, so that it can be bold in advocacy and action. Third, hope is closely related to the incarnation, stems from it. Fourth, it has an eschatological dimension. Jackelén roots it in Hebrews 11:1 and Romans 8:24–25. Hope thinks of the future as an advent, so it is waiting for God while we work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Phil 2:12–13). This fear and trembling applies to the minor hopes. The essential hope of Christianity is pure advent. Jackelén also

reaches for the Book of Revelation as a source of hope. She reads it as a book exposing the violence of the powerful of the time against the power of the lamb. In it, violence is subjected to transformation. This leads to the notion of judgment, which, following Moltmann, Jackelén interprets as “the most wonderful thing that can be proclaimed to humans.”¹⁷ Finally, hope has an ecclesiological dimension. She links it to a vision of the church that is aware of its past, but does not see itself as a guardian of tradition. It is to be focused on the here and now in view of the future. Hope in such a perspective is not an emotion, but a respectable theological concept, a kind of ministry in the public sphere connecting with the church’s prophetic, diaconal, ethical, and theological activity. At the end of her lecture, Jackelén asked a question, legitimate e.g. in light of the *Study Guide*’s reflections on a single story, namely, how *One Hope* is possible. She answers by reaching back to the only Son of God given for the salvation of the world (John 3:16–17). Therefore, the hope of Christians is not just for Christians. It is an expectation of the fulfillment of God’s design for the world. It declares the certainty of God’s presence in the acts of hope, as well as the centrality of the cross in the universe. In doing so, one hope consists of three elements. First, an awareness of reality, which includes anger toward forces that oppose what is good, beautiful and true. Second, humility, that is, recognition of human imperfections, and that humanity is God’s co-creator. Finally, hope consists of courage, the choice of a bolder path combined with the impatience of hope. Such hope needs an embodiment. As an illustration, Jackelén told the story of the stole she received from the women of the Mexican state of Chiapas adorned with beautiful flowers, grown from hope—a foreshadowing of the gathering around the tree of life (Rev 22:2). Jackelén concluded by pointing out that one hope connects us to creation, quoting one of the Church of Sweden’s post-communion prayers that embraces all of creation.

The first of the responses to Jackelén’s keynote was presented by Pavlo Shvarts,¹⁸ bishop of the Lutheran Church in war-ravaged Ukraine—a country whose border runs about 250 kilometers from Krakow where the assembly met. In his response, he focused on hope

¹⁷ Jackelén, “One Hope,” 105.

¹⁸ Pavlo Shvarts, “Called To Share The Treasure Of Hope,” in *One Body, One Spirit, One Hope Report*, 107–109.

as the content of the Gospel, paradoxically born in the cross and fully revealed in the resurrection. He called for an understanding that we ourselves need hope, and before we can share it ourselves, we need to hear it in the stories of others. Only this way will it not become a cheap idea and remain the power of the Holy Spirit. Listening to another is also necessary to take their suffering, cries and rejoices seriously. Shvarts concluded with the story of Ukraine's hope, told from among the experience of war and destruction, which has no other option but to cling to the Latin *Dum spiro spero*. In conclusion he said: "Hope is the gift of God that gives us the strength to live; it lifts our hands for battle against the injustice of this world and for service to those in need. This hope is part of our faith and the treasure we are called to share with others."¹⁹

The second response was prepared by Katarina Kuhnert²⁰ who is involved in the Carbon Neutral Task Force at the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. She referred, among other things, to Jackelén's keynote interpretation of the Book of Revelation and its message critical of the powers of this world. She called for the integrity of theology and action to provide the world with the spiritual leadership it needs, and that "means letting our hope lead us over and through the unknown."²¹ She also advocated hope to outweigh despair. For this it must not be an ethereal idea, but must be rooted in reality with its dirt and sweat. She pointed to the role of relationships in thinking about hope. Hope as embodied needs a relationship with the land and place. Even if conditions are disastrous. Hope in her story is not created by human hands in accordance with the logic of empire. At the same time, it is capable of enduring much. She also emphasized the choice present in Jackelén's keynote between panic and hope. The latter associated with anger, humility and courage. She sees it as the intervention of the Holy Spirit, as in the Pentecost. She also called for the exercise of hope, for our hope to be realized in love.

The essential summary of the assembly's discussions is its *Message*.²² It was constructed around the three elements of the theme *One Body, One Spirit, One Hope*. It was created on the basis of the discussions between delegates and other participants in the assembly's so-called

¹⁹ Shvarts, "Called To Share," 109.

²⁰ Katarina Kuhnert, "A Choice, to Live With Hope," in *One Body, One Spirit, One Hope Report*, 109–111.

²¹ Kuhnert, "A Choice, to Live," 110.

²² "Message," in *One Body, One Spirit, One Hope Report*, 8–14.

village groups, and was adopted at a plenary session on the assembly's final day. The section devoted to *One Hope*, like the other two, devoted to *One Body* and *One Spirit*, begins with a reference to the assembly's worship life, which was one of the most important aspects of the assembly experience. It references a theme from Acker's Bible Study—being a human family during storms, in which Christ is with us. Further reference is made to the diagnoses of the various crises that are rolling our world, in the midst of which we hear the "Do not be afraid!" of the risen Christ. Hope in the *Message* is built on Christ and closely linked to the Spirit, who invites us to recognize its signs in the midst of the world. Further, *Message* contains a reference to the call to holistic mission²³ rooted in Baptism. It carries the call of the Spirit to proclaim the Gospel in word and deed and to be instruments of justice. The vocation of Christians is to build a communion of hope. A hope that has concrete content and that calls to mutual solidarity in the face of the world's challenges. This unifying dimension of hope also extends beyond the LWF communion. It is a courageous hope that gives itself to those in need, in service to the poor, the needy, the migrants. It speaks out in the public space on justice and human rights. It should tangibly shape the church's life, work, service and mission. Further in the *Message* comes a declaration of taking seriously the fact of being in a continuous process of Reformation and responding to challenges within the LWF communion and beyond. This one is combined with a commitment to learn from the past. It goes on to talk about diakonia as hope in action, also implemented in cooperation with partners from other religions. Diakonia understood not only as responding to people's needs, but also as working for greater justice, peace and reconciliation. The experience of LWF churches in dealing with the climate crisis was pointed out as a sign of hope. The section on *One Hope* concludes by stating: "Hope is the lens through which we look at the world, as followers of Christ, journeying together into the future."²⁴ 

Jerzy Stojka is a Lutheran Pastor and Professor at the Christian Academy of Theology in Warsaw, Poland. He is a member of the Advisory Council of Word & World.

²³ On the concept of holistic mission in LWF cf. *Mission in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment. An LWF Contribution to the Understanding and Practice of Mission* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2004).

²⁴ "Message" 14.