



THE
LUTHERAN
WORLD
FEDERATION

A Communion
of Churches

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REPORT OF THE GENERAL SECRETARY OF THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

Introduction

With great anticipation, we in the LWF communion office have been preparing for this first full meeting of the Council. The LWF Council—you—represent both the highest decision-making level as well as the fullest expression of the communion in between Assemblies. It is the combination of these two aspects which makes each council meeting a unique opportunity for the communion's collective discernment and decision-making. We in the communion office look forward to both a good meeting and to a fruitful period of joint work until the next Assembly of the LWF.

According to the constitution of the LWF, Assemblies “normally take place every six years” (LWF Constitution VII.2). This means, that the Thirteenth Assembly of the LWF shall take place in the year 2023. Letters will be sent later this year to invite proposals to host the Assembly. A decision about the venue should be taken during the Council meeting in the year 2019.

I want also to make us aware of the 75th anniversary of the LWF in 2022. The LWF purposely did not mark its 70th anniversary in 2017 so as to avoid diluting the focus on the Reformation anniversary.

Thinking further ahead, let me refer to initial discussions among Christian world communions regarding the 2,000 years of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ and how this may be marked jointly in 2033. It looks like a date that is very far away. However, the tracks for whatever may happen then have to be set soon.

Behind Us

The Assembly—A Moment of Encouragement

Yet, we shouldn't move ahead too quickly. An Assembly took place only a year ago and we must make sure to properly harvest from it.

The LWF President will share his own reflections and perspectives about the Assembly and where it leads us as a global communion of churches.

My own references to the Assembly relate to the follow-up entrusted to the communion office.

In view of our role as communion office to prepare the Assembly, we were keen to receive and review feedback from participants. We are grateful for a strong participation in the

evaluation of the Assembly. A systematized summary of the feedback was prepared and shared with you all in 2017. This summary is the basis of the Assembly Review Committee's work and its report to the Council (Exhibit 15 and 15.1).

The Assembly and the Reformation Anniversary: Good Insights and Lessons

The Assembly represents a time to connect, worship, pray, and reflect together. It offers the space to ponder collectively on God's calling, on issues and topics important to both the life and the witness of the global communion of churches. The fact that the Assembly took place in the very year in which the global communion commemorated the 500th anniversary of the Reformation significantly shaped its outcome.

We in the communion office sense that something important regarding "communion building" surfaced during this three-year period of joint work around the Reformation's anniversary.

- Powerful themes and sub-themes, sustained over a period of time, offered a common platform for theological engagement and reflection and knit churches together in conversation.
- Global Young Reformers and Women on the Move broke significant ground and were able to take the global processes of the communion deep into the LWF member churches. They also set an agenda for the global communion, which quite significantly shaped the Assembly's outcome.
- The "ecumenical accountability" pledged by the LWF for the commemoration anniversary was taken up locally, connecting the poles of "local to global," which are often so hard to bring into interaction.

It may still be worthwhile in the near future to undertake an external evaluation of the communion's engagement around the Reformation anniversary—not because of what was done, but because of the lessons we may take for the future.

A publication presenting the highlights of the Reformation anniversary will be shared during the Council meeting.

The Communion Spoke Its Mind: Where Do We Go with It?

The various resolutions and statements of the Assembly, as well as its message, have all been brought to the attention of the LWF member churches by special mail. Member churches have a key responsibility when it comes to carrying out the commitments and directions expressed at the Assembly.

But there is indeed also a role for the LWF communion office with its mandate to convene and facilitate, or programmatically support, member churches to express their calling and at times even implement their calling on their behalf. Accordingly, we in the communion office have processed the Assembly's outcome in three different ways:

- Immediately accommodating some directions and content into existing programs, where possible
- Launching new initiatives for future program implementation (see below)
- Including the whole of the Assembly outcome into the strategy development process

In Front of Us: Highlights from the Council's Agenda

Direction, purpose and focus: the LWF Strategy 2019–2024

The development of a strategy for a global communion of churches is a complex process. There are many varying if not at times even conflicting interests in the communion. Instead of attempting to accommodate each of these interests into the strategy, we have rather sought to keep a strong focus on what the 145 member churches of the LWF are committing to do *together*. I want to encourage you to keep this focus while receiving the strategy (Exhibit 10.2) for discussion and approval.

The “LWF Strategy 2019–2024” is not about reinventing the LWF, but about building on an ongoing journey and witness, furthering existing commitments, while also taking up new emphases and thematic priorities. We have attempted to keep a balance between continuity and innovation.

It is worth noting that LWF World Service developed its own strategy in parallel to the global strategy of the LWF. The two processes were connected so that the strategy of the operational diaconal arm of the LWF is duly rooted in the global strategy of the LWF.

The approval of the LWF Strategy will be an important milestone, because it represents a key document for the Council's work, as well as for us in the communion office.

After the Approval of the Strategy

Its approval has to be followed by important work so that the strategy actually gets traction and is implemented. For us in the communion office, this will mean working on the following tasks during the second semester:

Develop program plans and a revised budget for the year 2019 and onwards

The program plans and the 2019 budget that you have received as exhibits (Exhibit 11 and 11.1) are still (mostly) aligned to the ongoing strategy. Once the Council approves the strategy, we will revise and reorganize, as well as include those new programs that the strategy is calling for. We know that with this new strategy it can't and won't be all business as usual.

It will be the responsibility of the Executive Committee at its November meeting to approve the revised plans and 2019 budget. I intend to involve the chairpersons of the committees, and particularly the Finance Committee (by teleconference), so that the Executive Committee feels comfortable in taking action on the revised plans and budget.

Align the LWF communion office to best deliver on the priorities

During the implementation of “LWF Strategy 2012–2018,” we in the communion office have come across some issues needing attention regarding the way in which we are organized and structured. We have seen huge potential, for instance, if we overcome compartmentalization and seek more synergy and cooperation in our work. The second semester of 2018 will be a time to live into changed structural arrangements and working processes, so that we are able to take up the roles at the start of the implementation of the new strategy that the LWF Communion is expecting from its office.

Mail to member churches

Once the strategy is approved, translated, and printed, we will send it to all the LWF member churches. My covering letter will include a question for their reflection: “Where do you see your church becoming part and contributing to this strategy as it sets out, together

with 144 other churches, to live and work together around these priorities and commitments?”

This is far more than a question of finances, important as finances are. It encompasses the fundamental question about how the LWF member churches embrace the priorities of the communion and contribute toward their implementation.

Indeed, an LWF strategy will not ever supersede any local strategy of its member churches. I believe it to be equally clear, however, that a local church that claims its participation and place in a global communion will want to open itself up to receiving the impulses, tasks, and commitments that member churches jointly embrace as a global communion of churches. Here too, I assume, it can't all be just business as usual. To use an image from the Assembly: member churches will look at the bell(s) they hold in their hands and seek to add to the tune of the global communion as it lives and works together for a just, peaceful, and reconciled world.

Honesty and Gratefulness as We Look at the LWF's Journey

Back in 2011, we in the communion office did not ask such questions when we sent the strategy to member churches. Today, however, it seems self-evident that these questions have to be asked. I believe this fact is a reflection of the deep engagement around questions of “accountability and autonomy” or “catholicity and contextuality,” which the LWF dealt with during the recent study process on the “Self-understanding of the Lutheran Communion.” It was not in vain to take up these complex discussions: they have taken the communion a step further.

For the period ahead of us, I plead that we continue applying a perspective that is both *honest* and *positive* about our ongoing journey as a communion. *Honest*—to acknowledge that we may not always be there, where we envision ourselves to be as a communion. There are realities and challenges; there is ongoing labor pain while becoming who we are already by God's word. Only by acknowledging this will we be able to make all this to become our common task. *Positive*—to acknowledge that by God's grace we are definitely not there anymore, where we used to be in the past. We continue leaving stages behind as we live deeper into our shared call. All this we should receive, celebrate, and steward as a precious gift.

A Sensitive Process: Assessment of Location

To pre-empt a question that may be on your minds: the “LWF Strategy 2019–2024” has been developed in a way that does not depend on the outcomes of the assessment process, because the strategic purpose and the priorities of the LWF Communion do not depend on where its office is or may be located; what needs to be revised, if required, would be the level of ambition to implement these priorities, hence the plans and budgets (see above). This, by the way, we do annually, when we assess the funding basis for our annual plans and adapt our programs to what is available to us.

With the action of the Meeting of Officers in November 2017, the process of assessing the location of the communion office has moved on: a task force has been constituted, and its chairperson will deliver an interim report (Exhibit 13) to this Council.

The assessment process is sensitive, loaded with political implications. It creates understandable anxiety, also among my colleagues in the communion office. They are informed about the process and know the objectives of the Council's discussions: to

understand the need for this discussion and to indicate possible options of what it may want to explore further.

The discussions will take place in a confidential session, because the Council needs to have space conducive for such discernment. However, for the sake of the culture of participation and transparency we attempt to nurture in the LWF, I have requested of the President that some from the communion office's Staff Representative Council be allowed to listen to your deliberations.

The Green Village—WCC's Property Development

Let me refer in this context to discussions with the World Council of Churches (WCC), which hosts the LWF communion office in the Ecumenical Centre. The WCC's property development plan is moving ahead, with the construction of the first building scheduled to take place in the year 2020. At this point, the only implication for the LWF relates to the archives, which will be affected somewhat by the construction. The LWF is well prepared to respond to this challenge.

Provided the stages of the property development take place as planned, the LWF communion office will be more substantially affected in the year 2022, when the building in which it is currently located will be knocked down and a new building erected (the so-called "B building," for offices to be rented). WCC has indicated that it would arrange for provisory location for LWF within the Ecumenical Centre during this period.

The last stage of the property development relates to the core building of the Ecumenical Centre. An additional floor above the main hall and chapel will be added. The chapel, the hall, and the main entrance all need to be preserved, since they have been declared of cultural interest by the Canton of Geneva. The construction of this "A building" will not take place before 2024. Because of the restricted space in this building, and while waiting for the decisions of the LWF Council on the location, I have indicated that WCC should not include the LWF in their plans for the A building. Rather, and depending on decisions, the LWF would consider options regarding the B building, which would still be connected to the main hall, chapel, and cafeteria and is being developed as a building for offices.

Without yet going into concrete details, WCC has indicated it would offer a fair rent to the LWF.

Exploration on Changing the Name of the LWF

The Standing Committee for Constitution and Membership will be dealing with three resolutions of the Assembly that would have implications for the LWF constitution or bylaws: documenting binding practices while electing leadership, mentioning "gender justice" as a foundational commitment of the LWF, and exploring whether to change the name of the LWF into "communion."

As I have been reflecting on the resolution of the name change, the parable of the talents has come to my mind (Mt 25:14-30). I regard the call into communion as this precious gift, the talents, which God is offering and entrusting to LWF member churches. Not to dilapidate them. Not to bury and hide them either. But to do something with this gift, to nurture and to grow it. With this parable in mind, I believe that the exploration process called for by the Assembly is a necessity. Such a proposed name change would signify both the reality into which God calls LWF member churches and the reality of what they are already because of God's call.

Such a name change would certainly come with its own complexities, for instance for the “branding” of the LWF, hence for how it is known, particularly to external stakeholders.

But there are also some theological aspects that need to be addressed, particularly in the field of the ecclesiology of an LWF further living into the reality of being and becoming a global church. The possible name change, I believe, cannot just be something about replacing some words in the LWF constitution. It needs to be based on a shared understanding of the actual implications of this name change. What a great opportunity to continue addressing these theological aspects, some of them already laid out in the “Self-understanding of the Lutheran Communion:” What do we expect from each other as members of the communion? What is the nature and possible extent of decision-making by the LWF Council? How will difference and disagreement on doctrinal matters be handled? What would it mean to move ahead with a name change, while still suffering the reality of severed relations among some of its members?

It is worthwhile to keep in mind that in the year 2003 the LWF Assembly already made a decision in this respect:

The Assembly adopts, in line with the recommendation of the Council in September 2002, an expansion of the name of the LWF, so that the full name will be “The Lutheran World Federation – A Communion of Churches,” with the understanding that when, for practical reasons the full name is too long, the present name without the addition also remains valid, and “LWF” remains the normal acronym.

Evidently, a rather pragmatic approach, probably a reflection of what could be reached then. It also conveys something about the practical challenges of a name change. As a result, however, the short version is the one that prevails today.

Implementation Report 2017 According to Strategic Priority Areas

You will all receive a printed version of the LWF Annual Report (Annex 1) during the Council meeting. It conveys in a nutshell what the LWF communion office did with and on behalf of the LWF member churches.

The “Implementation Report of the LWF Strategic Priority Areas for 2017” (Exhibit 10.2) gives a more detailed account of the implementation of programs by the LWF communion office. Responding to the evaluation by the preceding council members, we have tried to bring this report to a higher level, so as to reduce the volume of documentation to be processed by the Council.

We have also redesigned the agendas of the committees so that the short time available in committee is spent more on giving direction in view of programs to be implemented and less on looking into work already completed. Clearly, the lessons from program implementation, as presented by the department directors in their reports, will be an important source while giving this direction.

I am not repeating in my report what the implementation report offers as information, tempting as it is to highlight some of the exciting developments and activities that have taken place during the last year.

Financial Statements

The audited “LWF Consolidated Financial Statement as of December 31, 2017” (Exhibit 19.1) is reviewed and discussed by the Finance Committee, and it is this committee that

will recommend action to the whole Council. The chairperson of the Finance Committee will present and analyze the statements.

From my end, I have expressed my heartfelt gratitude to my colleagues in the communion office and in the 25 countries where World Service is active for their careful stewardship of financial resources: again this year the audit report did not include any qualification. Systems and processes are in place to safeguard high standards of accountability.

Again, the LWF budget has grown. While the most substantial growth relates to World Service (work in South Sudan and Uganda, as well as the Augusta Victoria Hospital), it is noteworthy that the Department for Mission and Development has been able to reverse its downward trend regarding finances and shows a budget increase as well. This relates to new programs (Waking the Giant and Symbols of Hope), which are telling us about other ways than the traditional to support churches as they engage in diaconal action. The Department for Theology and Public Witness (DTPW) slightly decreased its funding by two percent – mostly due to less activities around the intense year 2016. However, DTPW has also succeeded in securing nontraditional funding, which is a direction we in the communion office want to continue developing.

I believe that the LWF member churches will celebrate how they, through World Service, have been able to increase the significant ministry of compassion and service (diakonia) to suffering people and communities in the world. I also believe that they will want to see how to grow equally in their other commitments around theological work and member churches relations and support, which are similarly close to their hearts. I personally do not consider the growth of World Service to be a problem to be addressed; rather, it is the slow growth in the other areas that the communion cares for that needs to be addressed. As said above, we in the communion office are working on it.

Looking Around Us and Into the Future

Being the Church in Convoluting Times

The times in which we live are complex, if not convoluted. Many developments point at increasing polarization and fragmentation in the world and indeed also in the church. It is becoming harder for people, communities, and states to work together. Instead, there is an ongoing propensity to withdraw, to antagonize, to resort to corrosive discourse and even to violence.

These developments are very challenging for several of our member churches. Some of them feel almost paralyzed in view of this polarization that affects them internally. At times, they choose not to position themselves, or to refrain from speaking publicly, so as to avoid getting caught up by the dynamics of conflict and division. Yet, as they keep silent, they also fail to deliver a word of hope, a sense of direction, a pastoral encouragement or admonishment for the sake of the Gospel. The long-term effects of that silence are dangerous, we know; rather than a sign of neutrality, silence could be interpreted as complicity with injustice.

Others instead are becoming prey to the big temptation of aligning with political powers, playing into their agendas of identity politics, often condoning this with fundamentalism and populism based on the principle of exclusion. What is “Christian” is being redefined—up to the point of claiming that for the sake of protecting the “Christian identity” of the church, of a country, or a whole region, exclusion and oppression would be legitimate and persecution and violence against others because of their skin, gender, ethnicity, nationality,

acceptable. Would God really welcome being protected like this? Does God even need protection?

It's the other way 'round! Jesus Christ came for the opposite: in God's name, he stood with those who—often in God's name—were being crushed by the prevailing religious–political alliance of his time. He confronted a status quo that was based on exclusion and oppressive violence and instead pointed at the in-breaking reign of God as the horizon against which to assess all present realities. Jesus' call to conversion is a call to move out of the past, to think beyond the status quo, and to begin aligning to the future that God promises. That's why he taught us to pray: "Thy Kingdom come!" and not "Thy past be restored." Christian faith is about the future.

A church of hope or a hopeless church: It is indeed a defining and challenging moment for the church. Yet, I couldn't also think of a better time to be the church! Because the church is entrusted with the message of Christ: one of hope, that drives out fear; one of compassion that challenges indifference; one of justice that resists oppression; one of reconciliation that holds fast to peace-building. The church has a message that is so desperately needed today.

I want to invite this Council to consider issuing a word of encouragement to LWF member churches, so that they accept these challenging times as a *kairos* to be the church, a time to draw from the deep sources of faith so as never to be driven away from the message of the liberating grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. I believe such a word of encouragement would also caution against all exclusionary populism and fundamentalism, as expressed recently in a cosponsored theological consultation of the LWF in Berlin, Germany.

Churches Living in Contexts of Violence

Such a statement would be a huge encouragement to those churches that are holding fast to a message of peace while living in contexts of violence. The LWF Assembly raised the communion's collective awareness about this reality.

It is indeed heartwarming to see how LWF member churches in Nicaragua, in Indonesia, in the US, in Venezuela and Nigeria, in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, to name a few, keep up their voice calling for peace and promoting that "robust moderation," which the LWF member church in Jordan and the Holy Land has been standing for.

As in this specific case, other churches too keep up their message of peace while directly targeted by violence and discrimination. The LWF communion office has been accompanying in particularly close ways our member churches in Indonesia, Nigeria, Ethiopia and India, where they have been subject to violence. Later this year I will be visiting our member church in Nepal, and the World Service program in that country, in which legislation is being discussed that would have repercussions on the free expression of faith. Next year in May, I shall be visiting our member church in Kazakhstan, where similar new legislation is also being discussed.

#MeToo—And What It Means for the Church

During the last year, the appalling reality of systemic, ongoing violence against women suddenly surfaced. Eventually, the silence was broken, concrete experiences of sexual violence were named and denounced. In my home country of Chile, students, mostly female, have occupied several universities, tired of sexism and patriarchal attitudes ranging

from pejorative comments and “jokes” to massive abuse, rape, and even femicides. Rightly so, women won’t take it anymore.

A consensus continues to grow in the world that violence and exclusion of women is, from all points of view, unacceptable and not to be tolerated. Thanks be to God, churches are not exempt from that growing consensus, and for good reasons people inside and outside the church expect the church to lead, never to stand in the way of such consensus.

Fortunately, the LWF has a solid trajectory naming and addressing questions of violence against women. The Twelfth Assembly conveyed in clear ways that LWF member churches are not leaning back in a complacent attitude of “mission accomplished,” but are looking into what next needs to be done so as to continue growing into a reality where both men and women can enjoy relationships of justice and dignity, with nobody affected by violence. We in the communion office are committed to implementing programs and processes that will support this vision. We are equally committed to safeguard highest standards and systems to swiftly address any complaint, both in the LWF Communion Office, where staff has all signed a Code of Conduct, as well as in LWF country programs, which adhere to the Core Humanitarian Standards (CHS).

Later this year, I intend to send all LWF member churches a slightly adapted *Code of Conduct for Participants in Events Organized by the Lutheran World Federation*, which is being used for this Council meeting as well. I will do so, because I am convinced that without such concrete tools the churches’ declared commitment to overcome violence against women will not get practical traction when faced with actual cases of violence. I believe that LWF member churches will receive this code of conduct as an offer that supports their commitment to “Say No to Violence Against Women” (LWF publication, 2002). Some may already have such tools in place. Others will of course adapt it and contextualize it, but never to better accommodate contextual expressions of violence, but to more contextually address them.

Very much in line with what the Twelfth Assembly resolved, I want to propose that for the next step in our commitment toward the LWF Gender Justice Policy, we begin to emphasize more strongly how men are empowered toward a new way of understanding themselves. There are already good initiatives about positive parenting (currently ongoing in Costa Rica, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, to name some) and about new, nonviolent conduits to express masculinity. Women’s empowerment, while still needed, has brought us as far as it could. Men’s empowerment toward just and nonviolent relationships needs to be added now, so as to take the communion further in this journey.

The Commitment Toward Women’s Ordination Is Not up for Negotiation

In light of this new awareness that is surfacing, I see the question of women in the ordained ministry as another dimension, very specific to the church, that points to their systemic and ongoing exclusion. I know the few biblical texts that are quoted so as to give a biblical legitimacy to such exclusion and to explain it as God-given. I can’t help, however, to remember that crusades, *conquista*, slavery, apartheid, and other practices of exclusion and oppression were also substantiated with such few biblical texts, which both brought unspeakable suffering to millions of people and stood so much against everything that the Gospel of Christ is all about.

I am grateful that the Twelfth Assembly reiterated the commitment of the communion toward the full inclusion of women in the ordained ministry. That resolution gives us in the

LWF communion office a clear and strong direction so as never to allow women's ordination to become negotiable including in our ecumenical engagement. Our dialogue partners know that talking to the LWF means talking to a communion that does not hide, but openly states, explains, and defends its commitment to jointly pursue the goal of the ordination of women.

Youth Participation and Church Revival

We in the communion office are already missing the first generation of Global Young Reformers. They invigorated the communion's journey with their passion and creativity; they helped the whole communion to grow, for instance regarding the challenge of climate justice. We will be relaunching invitations to reach out to a second generation of young reformers and thereby continue making the LWF so amazingly vital and sustainable.

Lately, I have been thinking about the potential of the LWF as a global communion to support churches locally to meaningfully include youth in their life and decision-making. More particularly, I have been connecting this easily retrievable potential with the strong direction that emerged from the Twelfth Assembly around the theme of the revival of the church.

I am very glad to see how churches in the Nordic context are networking among themselves already and looking into ways of working together, sharing good practices, reflecting together about this important challenge about revival of the church. It looks as if a big breakthrough could be achieved: for the first time, Nordic churches would be working together regionally on a common LWF program. What this means also for communion building is a story that other regions will be able to tell with joy. I want to offer both a big encouragement and all LWF's support for this initiative to unfold.

I believe, however, that a key dimension of such a process, and how churches would address revival, will be the ability to include youth in that endeavor. No generation should think and work toward the church it hopes to be leaving to the next generation, without reflecting together *with* that next generation about such a vision. How else would there be ownership?

I want to further test the idea to apply a model we have been working on in the LWF about the "five gradual stages of participation" and how churches would want to engage in a voluntary process of growing from one stage to the other. I see these churches working together, maybe even across regions, doing a baseline assessment, to identify where these churches see themselves today. I see these churches coming to the next Assembly to share a story of joy and accomplishment because of the way they were able to increase meaningful participation of youth.

It is encouraging to see how some churches, inspired by the experience of the Twelfth Assembly, have started to pass legislation to secure space for youth participation in governance structures.

Climate Justice—A New Programmatic Commitment of the LWF

During the last few months a working group has developed a concept to take up the various resolutions that relate to the challenge of climate change and, more generally, about how LWF member churches grow in awareness about both the ecological challenges and how human beings are so intimately connected to the whole of creation.

The "LWF Strategy 2019–2024" includes a new emphasis on climate justice in its priorities. The goals are to support LWF member churches in their climate education and action, to contribute to mitigation and adaptation, and to strengthen advocacy for resolute climate action at all levels.

I believe that the LWF communion with its strong theological, diaconal, and advocacy commitments is uniquely positioned to make a huge difference as the human family grapples with the question of climate change and looks into how to tackle this challenge.

During 2017, the LWF received an unexpected legacy (we understand the person was a refugee after the Second World War, was resettled with the help of the LWF, and wanted to express gratitude for that support), which we in the communion office have decided to use to staff a new position in the communion office to coordinate the LWF's engagement on climate justice. Once the strategy is approved, we would work toward hiring as early as the second semester 2018, so that everything is in place when programmatic work starts in 2019.

Deepening the Engagement Around Theological Education and Formation

Theological education is a fundamental feature of our Lutheran identity, a driver of ecclesial, social, and political transformation, and a historic commitment of the LWF. Taking up the strong impulses of the Twelfth Assembly, we in the communion office have moved on and have already undertaken some steps. Building on the many regional and local initiatives, we understand our role as convening member churches and theological institutions for a participatory network. We also see our role in creating and enabling opportunities for trans-contextual learning and in fostering the conditions for transformational education and formation.

A Network for Theological Education and Formation (TEF) started its work earlier this year and is helping to further clarify focus and possible actions that we want to undertake in the coming years.

We see ourselves facilitating a discussion among the LWF member churches to more systemically look into the amazing wealth and resources on theological education and formation within the communion (theology, publications, institutions, scholarships, teachers, students, to name few) and how to more strategically align them so that the whole body of the communion takes utmost advantage of these resources.

A New Program on Lutheran Identity

LWF Pre-Assembly messages as well as the Twelfth Assembly expressed commitment to strengthen the theological identity of Lutheran member churches.

During the last few months, we in the communion office have developed a concept to launch a study process—actually, a global conversation—to reflect on the contemporary significance of core concepts of Lutheran identity as they are lived out by churches in their various contexts in the world.

It will be an inductive, analytical, and constructive process, where a sustained conversation at the regional and global level will help to articulate a shared narrative, rooted in our confessional identity, of how churches live out their faith in holistic mission. With such methodology, I believe that the LWF will be growing further into an understanding of the communion being global and polycentric. It would be another way to live into the vision of former LWF President Josiah Kibira when he spoke of the LWF member churches being always and all of them givers and receivers at the same time. There is no one center anymore that defines what it is to be Lutheran. It is today something that the LWF member churches have to articulate jointly.

We are currently raising funds in order to launch the process later this year with a global consultation in Addis Ababa. The process will run until the year 2022 and has been designed in a way that the end result may constitute one of the key inputs for the LWF Assembly in 2023.

Strong Dynamism in Ecumenical Relations

The Reformation anniversary has brought forth some very important ecumenical developments. Lutherans and Roman Catholics jointly commemorated the Reformation anniversary in Lund and Malmö (2016), Lutherans and the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) signed the Wittenberg Witness in July 2017, and Anglicans affirmed the substance of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ), resulting now in five Christian world communions (Lutherans, Roman Catholics, Methodists, Reformed and Anglicans) sharing a common ground on the fundamental question about salvation in Christ.

We are building on each of these significant milestones:

- The Letter of Intent signed between LWF World Service and Caritas Internationalis in Malmö 2016 is being followed up with joint work already in implementation in Colombia and about to be launched in Nepal.
- The WCRC and the LWF have committed to work on an intentional follow-up to the Wittenberg Witness (2017).
- The five signatories to the JDDJ have agreed to meet in March 2019 to ask the obvious, yet far-reaching question that the amazing development with the JDDJ is posing: What could it mean, in terms of being the church, that these five global communions have found a common ground when it comes to the fundamental question of salvation in Christ?
- And we are thinking ahead already with the Roman Catholic Church to our next dialogue phase about Eucharist, ministry, and Church, to be launched after summer 2019.

I am glad to annex to my report the Lutheran–Orthodox Statement (Annex 2), which is the end result of three decades of relationship building and theological discussions. Annexed is also the report of the Lutheran–Mennonite–Roman Catholic dialogue, which has come to completion. The Roman Catholic–Lutheran report on “Baptism and Growth into Communion” is due to be presented at the next Council in 2019. This Council is also asked to approve members of the Anglican–Lutheran International Commission on Unity and Mission (ALICUM), a structure that takes us beyond classical dialogues and invites practical engagement in mission.

In all of our dialogues, we are greatly supported by the Institute for Ecumenical Research (IER) of Strasbourg. I take advantage to thank Prof. Dr Theodor Dieter for his longstanding and great support to the ecumenical endeavors of the LWF and to welcome Dr Jennifer Wasmuth as the new Director of the IER.

Suspended Annual Meetings with the ILC

Not everything has been positive, however. The relationship with the International Lutheran Council (ILC) has deteriorated. In different letters, I have been making the ILC’s leadership aware of various concerns that have arisen during the past two years. They related to aggressive and wrong communication about the LWF or to the intended changes in ILC’s

constitution to enable conservative groups and individuals within some larger churches (LWF) to join the ILC under a special category.

The inability of the ILC to uphold a position that the LWF and ILC publicly stated only some few years ago regarding churches with double membership (ILC–LWF) eventually led me, in consultation with the LWF President, to propose a temporary suspension of our annual meetings until after the second half of 2019.

For us in the LWF, the annual meetings with ILC are very important. They have brought about important fruits, for instance among one of our member churches struggling with division. Lately, however, the positive atmosphere and good discussions at our meetings were put into question by the open hostilities, attacks, and divisive behavior increasingly happening outside those meetings.

The LWF is asking to clarify with whom it is dialoguing, for what sake, and what the implications of these dialogues are for both the LWF and ILC.

A Communion That Doesn't Live for Itself: Diaconal Presence and Advocacy in the World

As stated above, the LWF has deepened its diaconal and prophetic engagement in the world. Leaning on the biblical narrative of the transfiguration of the Lord (Mt 17:1-9), the LWF does not conceive relationships of deep communion without linking it to journeys “down into the valleys.” As they see the transfigured face of Christ that shines and is revealed in their relationships of communion, LWF member churches are sent to meet the transfigured face of the sick (Mt 17:14-20) and become a healing presence in the midst of their suffering. Unity is embedded in God's call to mission; it unfolds its deepest meaning when it becomes an active expression of God's loving outreach to all humankind.

During the year 2017, the communion directly reached out and touched the lives of more than three million people, most of them refugees and internally displaced people—an unprecedented number for the LWF, which speaks to the unprecedented number of people seeking protection. Actively committing to the ACT Alliance at local and international levels, the LWF continues to enjoy high prestige and credibility among the communities it serves and the organizations it works with, including United Nations agencies.

The high specialization that this requires has at times been a source of alienation between World Service and member churches. I am glad to report that, while still facing some challenges, relationships have significantly improved. Myanmar, Nepal, Jordan, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Kenya, Colombia, Central America, Angola—these are all places where regular contact and cooperation are already taking place. We in the LWF communion office are committed to continue growing in this respect.

During this last year, we have deepened the linkages between our local presence, both in the form of our constituency (member churches) and World Service to advocate globally with an informed voice, duly rooted in living expressions of local civil society. The LWF continues to be instrumental in bringing those voices to the UN system, be it regarding the CEDAW (Convention on the Eradication of All Forms of Violence Against Women) processes or in the various human rights forums and their instruments, including the Universal Periodic Reviews (UPR), to which each member state is subject.

Through such actions, the LWF has been able to help secure land rights of vulnerable communities. Securing land rights has been a pioneering project of the “local to global to local” methodology, which the LWF is excellently well positioned to apply more consistently in its work.

Equally, the LWF has been invited as one of the few international nongovernmental organizations to sit at the table at which the Global Compact on Refugees is being developed. Here too, we have been contributing with conceptual input connected to practical experience. Our work in Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia was looked at closely, and in June a South Sudanese refugee from Kakuma camp spoke in the UNHCR setting.

We in the LWF communion office are working toward holding the Council meeting 2019 in Uganda, where the demands of protection have increased significantly and the LWF was responding to a massive influx of 3,000 refugees per day earlier this year (South Sudanese and from the DRC). We believe such exposure will be both a great encouragement to our colleagues working tirelessly on the ground and provide a deeper understanding for the LWF Council about the ministry that Lutheran churches share in the world and to which only a few are normally exposed.

[A Spoke in the Wheel \(Bonhoeffer\): How Long Will We Bandage the Victims Without Looking at Causes?](#)

During last year, and again recently, I spoke publicly in response to unprecedented violence and carnage. In especially grave cases, we have done so jointly with the LWF President, underlining the seriousness of the situation, for instance, when evidence of the use of chemical weapons was brought forward and a self-organized coalition decided to retaliate, thereby ignoring existing international procedures and instruments to address allegations of such calamitous actions.

Also, when we look at our diaconal ministry through World Service, which keeps responding to ever increasing suffering in the world, we wonder how far we can go and how long this will go on. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's analogy has been a topic of our discussions in the communion office; in referring to the evil of the Nazi regime, he concluded that there are times in which a spoke needs to be stuck into the wheel that keeps crushing and destroying human beings. We cannot continue tending to the victims, but need to go to the root causes.

The UN Security Council has been under heavy critique because of its inability to adequately respond to the crisis in Syria, the Israel–Palestine conflict, situations in South Sudan, and many more. I would be careful with the critique: a UN Security Council can only be as strong and effective as its members and the international community want it to be. As a matter of fact, the lack of response to some of the most flagrant and bloody conflicts today is due to five nations with veto power, which often continue setting their particular geopolitical interests above the common interest of peace and stability.

Yet, it is evident that the UN Security Council needs reform. We in the communion office have been exploring possibilities to join forces around a proposal led by Switzerland and meanwhile joined by several other countries, according to which a veto could not be used in cases of mass atrocities such as crimes against humanity, crimes of genocide, and war crimes.

I want to invite the Council to consider endorsing this proposal, also by speaking publicly to the need to upgrade (instead of dismiss) the UN Security Council so that it delivers on what it was created for.

Conclusion and Words of Gratitude

These days I have been using a sentence that has been very close to my heart: “We don’t know what the future holds for us, but we know who holds it for us.” Is there anything else we need to know as people of faith?

It is with this sense of gratitude for and confidence in God’s caring presence that I together with my colleagues have resumed our work after the Assembly, in the midst of rapidly changing times, with many ideas, many challenges, many projects, and an unbroken vision about this communion, rooted in Christ, living and working together for a just, peaceful, and reconciled world.

I am thankful to the LWF President for extraordinary availability and support in the midst of what I could only imagine are extremely heavy and demanding schedules.

I am grateful to the communion office leadership team for collegial support, creativity, and commitment; to my staff colleagues in the communion office, who are amazing in their passion and generosity, committed to “make it happen,” even when it means going uphill.

My gratitude goes also to my colleagues in the country programs for how they serve on behalf of the member churches, at times in places nobody else goes or which are totally forgotten (DRC), thereby conveying such a powerfully positive story about what this communion is all about.

I am grateful for the Executive Committee and our joint work last December and look forward to this meeting with the whole Council. I am committed to work toward a relationship of trust and cooperation, transparency and accountability.

Respectfully submitted,

Martin Junge

LWF General Secretary