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ADDRESS OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

Opening remarks

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, I am profoundly delighted to welcome you to the first LWF Council meeting after the Twelfth Assembly. Although we met at the end of the Assembly, it was in order to kick start our journey after our election and inauguration. I bring you greetings of peace and love from the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria and from my spouse, pastor Ruth Musa Filibus. I warmly welcome you to our first Council meeting in the triune name of our gracious God, Amen.

Gratefully looking back

Looking back a year ago, I am particularly thankful to you and all those who participated in the Twelfth Assembly, so well hosted by our Namibian sisters and brothers. We recall with gratitude the incredible work done by the local organizing committee, constituted by the United Church Council of the Namibian Evangelical Lutheran Churches that made the Assembly historic and memorable; the central planning committee, constituted by the last Council for their awesome work; the work of the LWF communion from the Eleventh to the Twelfth Assembly under the governance of the former Council led by Bishop Dr Munib A. Younan and communion office staff under the stewardship of the General Secretary, Rev. Dr Martin Junge, and lastly the government and people of Namibia for being so gracious and hospitable during our stay in the country. We are deeply grateful and pray for God's blessing on each one. Amen.

“Liberated by God's Grace”: reimagining Assembly gains and Reformation anniversary

The Twelfth Assembly and the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation provided viable spaces for deeper reflection on the liberation of humanity and, indeed, the whole of creation. The theme, “Liberated by God's grace” evoked the consciousness that salvation is not and cannot be attained by exceptional human effort and merit, but incontrovertibly through the merit of Christ alone. The joint commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation with our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers in 2016 added a valuable dimension to our understanding of salvation as a gift to the whole earth. It also reinforced a sense of mutual responsibility for life-giving witness and ministry as we live on earth. The Lund commemoration worship deepened the commitment to the ongoing

dialogue between us and our Roman Catholic counterparts. We are grateful to God for the enriching fellowship between us and all other ongoing initiatives and efforts in our search for common understanding and more visible unity in the body of Christ.

Countless texts have been written on justification and salvation as graceful expressions of God's goodness that is experienced and realized regardless of human works and acts of reciprocity. You will recall the topic, "Liberated by God's grace" was unpacked in three topical discourses, namely "Creation - not for sale", "Human beings - not for sale" and "Salvation – not for sale". These call for moral and ethical actions that demonstrate the "not for sale". The biblical notion of liberated by God's grace that is at the core of Lutheran theological ethos, evokes the awareness that on our own, we cannot save ourselves, but that salvific action is God's initiative to salvage humanity. In recognition of this sacrificial initiative, we are constantly reminded that, while appreciating God, we should intentionally be ever willing to make sacrifices for fellow humankind and creation. This invites us to think again and again on our roles as stewards of creation and on our witness to the world.

"Freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8)

Firstly, this text reveals a situation in which having prepared His disciples, Jesus now sends them into the world on their own for the first time. Jesus had told his disciples to ask the Lord to send out workers into the harvest field. Interestingly, it was then that he somehow answered the prayer by sending them out himself. At this time, they were only to go to the lost sheep of Israel and preach the message that the Kingdom of Heaven is near. After his resurrection, Jesus sends them to all nations (Matthew 28:19). Here, Jesus equally gave them the power to heal the sick, raise the dead and drive out demons.

Jesus also gave the disciples a clear principle to guide their actions in proclaiming the Good News: "Freely you have received, freely give" (v. 8). This literally sounds as though Jesus was talking about generous giving of material resources – money, time and possessions to help others. Undoubtedly, these kinds of giving are great virtues we should all practice. Yet, Jesus was talking about a lot more that we have freely received from God: grace and mercy, love and forgiveness, the good news of God's salvation in Christ.

Thus, the theme of this Council brings to the fore our doctrinal foundation as Lutherans that everything, including salvation itself, is a gift from God. The author used a language that can be likened to the language of economy, that presupposes that salvation and any other life-sustaining things were and are being received without any form of payment on the part of the recipient.

The hymn, "Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me" is one of my favourites. It comes to mind as I reflect on the passage for our theme, especially the second and third stanzas:

² Not the labors of my hands can fulfill thy law's demands; could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow, all for sin could not atone; thou must save, and thou alone.

³ Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to thy cross I cling. Naked, come to thee for dress; helpless, look to thee for grace; foul, I to the fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die. ¹

¹ https://www.luthersem.edu/godpause/public_domain_hymns.aspx?hymn_id=224

Again, we are reminded of who we are – receivers and stewards of God’s free gift of grace in Christ.

We have to face the question of stewardship. What are the resources entrusted to us as a communion? How are they being used to care for the needs of others? The gospel we have received for free must take on flesh in the daily realities of our lives and relationships: “A Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbour. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbour through love.”² Simply put, we are a conduit through whom the Lord cares for our neighbours, freely, not for gain or selfish interest. In other words, as recipients of God’s free gift, it is expected that we in no way commodify salvation or any act of mercy done to a fellow human being. In his sermon on the ninth Sunday after Trinity, Martin Luther points out;

For just as Christ with all his works did not merit heaven for himself, because it was his before; but he served us thereby, not regarding or seeking his own, but these two things, namely, our benefit and the glory of God his Father; so also should we never seek our own in our good works, either temporal or eternal, but glorify God by freely and gratuitously doing good to our neighbor.³

As demonstrated on the cross, it is inconceivable for salvation, the core of human liberation, to be traded as a commodity, but rather as a generosity extended to humanity on a platter of gold. We are aware of acts that clearly suggest the commercialization of the gospel and other acts of mercy. People are being exploited and extorted of their valuables by so-called prophets of God.

In my country Nigeria for example, and in many other places, we are witnessing a situation in which people are compelled to offer money or other valuables in exchange for the promise of salvation, healing, deliverance and all other kinds of blessings. Unfortunately, the body of Christ does not have any regulatory body, global or local, empowered to check the excesses of those who distort and pervert the gospel. It is therefore incumbent on us to consistently raise our prophetic voices in the face of the blatant and subtle sale of salvation, creation and human beings, to re-echo our Assembly sub-themes. As a communion, we must deliberately remain firm in efforts to counter such acts by constantly reminding ourselves of the doctrinal ethos of “justification by grace through faith alone”.

Similarly, we must resist in any way the commodification of human beings and creation as was well articulated in our Assembly publications. Let me re-echo what we said before, during and after the Twelfth Assembly, and continue to say today, “Salvation – not for sale, Human Beings – not for sale; and Creation – not for sale”. We should learn from Luther, who was compelled by acts of extortion and exploitation in his time, that we must be restless in situations that make salvation saleable. Equally, we must be restless and uncomfortable with any conditions that suggest the commoditization of human life and creation.

² Kathryn A. Kleinhans. *Together by Grace: Introducing the Lutherans*. (2016) Augsburg Fortress, p. 15 (Referencing Martin Luther’s “Freedom of a Christian” and 44th Theses).

³ Sermons by Martin Luther. Edited by John Nicholas Lenker Translated by John Nicholas Lenker and others. Volume 4 for the 1st to 12th Sundays after Trinity, pp 265 – 267.
http://www.martinluthersermons.com/Luther_Lenker_Vol_4.pdf

Beyond the Assembly and Reformation anniversary: living out our resolutions

The Assembly has come and left us with immense memories. In one way or another, we were inspired, energized and emboldened by the various presentations and reflections during the Assembly. I was personally inspired, particularly by the spirit of commitment expressed by participants, as we went about the business of the Assembly. Such commitment and enthusiasm demonstrated our collective desire to see that the LWF flourishes by remaining relevant in our common witness in the world. LWF remains relevant in its witness with a deep sense of interconfessional accountability.

The Assembly ended by issuing three public statements and 26 resolutions. Both are critical to our life, ministry and witness as a communion of churches and keep the LWF alive to the existential realities of our world today. The resolutions touched on various issues that call for commensurate action in our ongoing mission, diaconal work and public engagement. Some are clarion calls to state and non-state entities to act justly for the greater good of humanity. I am well aware that some of the issues captured in the resolutions will be considered at this Council meeting. While the report of the General Secretary points out some direction on action already taken in relation to the resolutions, the LWF Strategy 2019 – 2024 offers opportunity for concrete implementation of the resolutions.

One of the resolutions relates to the question of changing demographic of the church globally. In my brief travels thus far, especially with churches in the northern hemisphere, I have had to respond to questions about the numerical decline of the church in those regions. Undoubtedly it also brings into question the sustainability of the communion, given the challenging economic situation of regions where the church continues to grow numerically, especially as we look to the future of the communion and to questions of location. At the same time, we must never lose sight of the fact that, on one hand, numerical growth of the church is not proof of its own faithfulness and, on the other, decline is not seen as lack of faithfulness.⁴ This calls for prayers and sober reflection that we do not end up bragging about numerical growth nor chastising ourselves about numerical decline that we lose sight of God's faithful children in every context. Scripture teaches us "The wind blows wherever it pleases" (John 3:8). Hence, I invite you to be open as we deliberate further on the commensurate actions expected of us by the Assembly on the resolutions.

The Reformation as a living action

The 500th anniversary was well celebrated across the globe, affirming the global and local nature of the Reformation today. Evidently, the deeper we reflect on the significance of the Reformation anniversary, the more we discover that the church today is in need of the compelling gospel message that is the gospel of God's salvation by the works of Christ alone, by grace alone, rooted in the Bible alone, that Luther and other reformers rediscovered 500 years ago. As was replete in the Assembly documents, we reaffirm that the work of reformation did not just end in the 16th century. If we hold to the notion "Ecclesia semper reformanda est", then I would like to think that the Reformation is not simply behind, but ahead and ongoing, in faith and works. As sinful and fragile human

⁴ Inspired by Matthew L. Skinner. *Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel: Encountering the Divine in the Book of Acts*. (2015) Baker Publishing, p. 41

beings, we are in constant need of introspection and of reforming our faith in Christ individually and collectively.

As the dust begins to settle on the enthusiasm surrounding the Reformation commemoration, we are left to grapple with the questions, Now what? What have we learnt about ourselves? Where is the Reformation leading us?

Hence, one way to look at the Reformation anniversary is to liken it to a cairn: a memorial but one that points the way. In the first instance, our journey through the 500th anniversary of the Reformation was a cairn in the sense of memory, looking back to where we came from – struggles, challenges and significant achievements, especially as they relate to question of our justification and in the search for Christian unity. We recall with gratitude the numerous ecumenical agreements that have been reached, with particular mention of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification and the act of apology and reconciliation with the Mennonites. But we should not get stuck in the image of a cairn as memorial. Rather, we are called to consider the anniversary as a cairn that points the way, the direction, looking forward to the way in which we could be instruments in God's hands to witness to the gospel in Word and service to the neighbor. As both Pope Francis and I made clear in our messages during the visit of the LWF President and Vice-Presidents to the Vatican last November, we look to the future with hope towards increased understanding, cooperation and unity in the body of Christ. Looking back then is only in order to remember with humility where we inflicted pain on each other. We are called to be the living stone and chosen people, and not dead stones as a cairn that serves only as memorial. As the words of first letter of Peter state, let us relate to the Reformation as living stones:

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture: "See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame." (1 Peter 2:4-6 NRSV)

Looking at the Reformation anniversary in the sense of living stones, we imagine the story of a lost person, finding ways to safety. Where he or she finds a cairn, it serves both as memorial and pointer. Let us not put aside eschatological and apocalyptic thoughts as we reminisce on Reformation. As a Council mandated to act on behalf of the Assembly, we need to contemplate and discern how we should sustain the lessons of the Reformation in all our engagements. I entreat us to look to God's promise for our ongoing journey now and in the future, both in this body and the resurrection.

Let me point to some of the overarching issues and processes for our ongoing journey:

Reasoning together on common issues confronting us as a people of God

There is no doubt that we are confronted by various contemporary challenges in our world today. Challenges that are capable of undermining our common humanity and bring to question our theological ethos. We reflected on many of these challenges during the Assembly. They include populism, racial discrimination, climate change, violent conflict and war, violent religious extremism, nuclear proliferation, economic policies and systems that place profit above human wellbeing, gender disparity and gender-based violence,

dispossession of lands and mineral resources, illegal occupation of territories, devastating humanitarian and refugee crises. The list can go on and on. We are called to prophetic action *together* as churches and as a communion of churches in the face of the ideologies, forces, and structures that trigger and perpetuate the aforementioned challenges. We are called to remember who we are as both objects of God's love and agents of it, liberated and empowered to defy, both in words and actions, acts that undermine human dignity.⁵

A world seeking healing and reconciliation

We live in a world that is injured and fragmented seeking healing and reconciliation. We continue to see and hear of wars and violent conflicts where people are separated from all ties - family members, community and ancestral lands. The scriptural narrative states, "... God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ... has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us... (2 Cor. 5:17-20). As individuals, churches and communion, we have responsibilities as "God's rusty tools" [Moe-Lobeda, p. 45] to be intentional in our involvement to facilitate initiatives that bring about healing and reconciliation in our local and global contexts.

But these "rusty tools" must remain firmly united. Our unity in Christ is a gift we have received and must freely give each other. In a world where there is so much hate and anger, people retreating unto themselves, our unity as Christians is the most powerful witness. It displays the power of the gospel that liberates us from ourselves and frees us to serve the neighbor. The words of the apostle Paul should become a reality: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). And by the way, Jesus said the world would believe our message when they see our unity (John 17:20-23).

What present and future generations need are bridges not walls. Here, I can only reiterate the Assembly resolution on interreligious relations: "We are all called to love our neighbor and to work with our sisters and brothers of other religions and those non-religious to build bridges of hope, love, peace, and justice in this deeply divided world." Without bridges the entire world will drown. We are called to build bridges as we painfully watch people drown or starve desperately in search of better living conditions. To build bridges where creation is commoditized and destroyed daily. To build bridges as we are awoken daily to the news of killing and destruction of human life and property, sometimes justified using religious texts. There can't be too many bridges.

Walking together with others

We are not alone in the public space. There are numerous others from within the Christian faith and in other religious faiths. Inspired by the spirit with which we went into the Reformation anniversary, we should continue to engage and deepen cooperation and collaboration within the Lutheran communion, ecumenically, ecumenically and with other religions and non-governmental players, with whom we share common objectives in the

⁵ Indebted to Cynthia Moe-Lobeda. "The Subversive Luther." In Carter Lindberg and Paul Wee, eds., *The Forgotten Luther: Reclaiming the Social-Economic Dimension of the Reformation*. Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2016, p. 49.

different areas of our interventions. We must not only sustain but nurture our joint actions, such as through the collaboration between us and Catholic relief agency Caritas Internationalis and Islamic Relief Worldwide. Equally crucial is that the LWF continues working closely with multilateral systems, such as the UN on human rights, gender justice and humanitarian crisis.

Again, I call on member churches to not retreat to their different corners but explore local possibilities for cooperation and collaboration with institutions and other entities with whom we have similar visions and missions.

Reformation and participation in the mission of God

Reformation reminds us of our participation in the mission of God. Moving beyond the Reformation, it is important we jointly hold concerns for prophetic voices in response to the challenges of human suffering in the world and missionary awareness. Neither should be peripheral in our shared journey.

Participating in the mission of God entails deliberate acts of evangelism: proclaiming the good news of salvation, conscious that approaches and methods may be determined by unique realities in each context. It is important that the LWF, through the communion office, remains firmly committed to accompaniment, as well facilitating mutual sharing and learning to churches as they discern God's call to engage in mission in their specific contexts.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude with the biblical parable I used when I accepted my election as president at the Twelfth Assembly;

"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you? The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'" (Matthew 25:34-40)

It is critical that we remain firm in our commitment toward growing as a communion liberated by God's grace. But we are not a communion preoccupied only with itself, but engaged in the world, for the love and service of the neighbor. Let us, therefore, continue to be inspired by this and other biblical narratives in our Christian journey and faithful witness in our world of religious diversity with its multifaceted challenges.

I pray God guides us in the compelling tasks ahead of us in this meeting and in our subsequent engagements, Amen.

I thank you.

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