



Greetings presented to the
International Partners' Consultation

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Northern Germany

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Landesbischof Gerhard Ulrich,
Distinguished Colleagues,
Honored Guests,
Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

It brings me great joy for me to be here with this distinguished gathering representing so many regions and churches within our global communion. We are gathered to witness the work of God in our midst, celebrating how God makes all things new. We have been brought here through the commitment of relationship from our companions in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Northern Germany, a relationship grounded in communion and strengthened through mutual accompaniment.

As the elected President of the Lutheran World Federation, I bring you greetings on behalf of the 145 churches in our global communion, representing over 72 million Christians in 98 countries. I bring you greetings also from our General Secretary, Rev. Martin Junge. This gathering is a foretaste of the feast to come when our communion will gather in Namibia for its General Assembly in 2017. In my role as President, I extend greetings to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Northern Germany on behalf of the many, many member churches represented here, including my own, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land. For many years, we have experienced good relationships between the ELCJHL and the Nordkirche. The resurrected Jesus told his first disciples that, "when the Holy Spirit has come upon you ... you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1.8). Now, it seems, the ends of the earth have come to Breklum.

As the Church in Northern Germany continues to explore what it means to live a new life of shared ministry and mutual support, it is significant that you have invited your

international companions to join you here in Germany. In this spirit of learning what it means to live with one another in a new configuration, walking together on a new path, we come from around the world to join you, accompanying you even as you accompany us.

The theme of this gathering is deeply important for our world today: "Walking together the Path of Justice." This is a significant theme because it communicates our global communion's commitment to accompaniment as the method for engaging the world. As the Lutheran World Federation has agreed with the publication of our document, "Mission in Context," engaging the world through accompaniment means seeking holistic wellbeing for all communities. Certainly, this wellbeing presupposes a commitment to justice in its many forms. Some, however, are confused about accompaniment. They feel that it is just walking together along a path, any path. Our calling brings more than that; accompaniment instead implies a *direction*, a movement toward a goal. We are not walking just anywhere; we are walking together toward God's will. And God's will, as this conference statement reminds us, is justice for all creation, including human beings and the earth.

As evidenced by the wide variety of countries and churches represented in this room, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Northern Germany has many companions. Just having many companions and partners, however, does not guarantee the spirit of accompaniment. It is, rather, a discipline that must be practiced. Our commitment to accompaniment reminds us the no church is independent. Instead, we are all interdependent on one another. How can we together learn to accompany one another more effectively, in ways more responsive to ever-changing challenges? How can we participate in the lives of other churches without interfering in decisions and commitments that are appropriately theirs? Even if some churches are growing in the Global South and we hear of declining membership numbers in the Global North, how can we better learn from one another and pray together for God's wisdom for engaging the world God loves?

As we prepare for 2017, all of us are challenged to reflect on what it means to be churches of the Reformation today. This question does not belong to one church or region alone; it is our shared question as we reflect together on how to respond to our various contexts. On the other hand, the celebrations of 2017 will provide us, as a global communion, an opportunity to revisit our shared foundational commitments. How can we best prepare ourselves to be in the spirit of the reformation, to celebrate the anniversary as disciples. Our commitment to a discipleship of equals extends ecumenically to all Christian families. In our commemoration of the Reformation, we reject triumphalism even as we strive to be clear about who we are and what values we claim. The Lutheran recognition that we are *ecclesia semper reformanda*, a church to be always reformed, is a sign of our humility calling us to discipleship.

Our commemorations are organized through the overarching theme, "Liberated by God's Grace." This theme reminds us of the freshness of the Gospel that emerged through the many different expressions of the Reformation, in dialogue with other approaches and traditions. We are conscious of the many contributions made by Reformed and Anglican churches throughout the world, along with the many other movements that emerged during the Reformation period. And of course these commemorations of the Reformation

bring us into renewed dialogue with our Orthodox and Roman Catholic sisters and brothers. These many strands of Christian self-understanding contribute together toward fresh comprehension of the Gospel that will guide us through our current political crises.

Our communion has decided to emphasize three sub-themes emphasizing God's grace. These are 1) Salvation–Not for Sale; 2) Human Beings–Not for Sale; 3) Creation–Not for Sale. With these themes, we see how our communion understands that the Gospel is not limited to individual salvation alone. We are, instead, called by God to have passion for the church *and* passion for the world.

We are clear that commemorating this anniversary does not allow for any kind of triumphalism. We emphasize that the heritage of the Reformation is calls us to be global citizens. This commemoration isn't just about our theological heritage or its initial context in western and central Europe. It is about how these Evangelical concepts unfolded in many different settings and times, leading to our global communion today. We are also conscious of our ecumenical accountability. Instead of celebrating apparent division in the Body of Christ, the anniversary renews our effort to seek Christian unity within the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

As we prepare for 2017, I encourage each of you to continue studying "From Conflict to Communion," released in 2013, and promote it as a resource in your home churches. With a strong historical emphasis, the document does an excellent job summarizing the contemporary challenges of Lutheran-Catholic relations and cooperation. This is good, since anniversaries are good times to re-tell stories about ourselves and others. As it says, "Lutherans and Catholics have many reasons to retell their history in new ways. They have been brought closer together through family relations, through their service to the larger world mission, and through their common resistance to tyrannies in many places."

"From Conflict to Communion" grounds our shared witness as followers of Jesus Christ in God's gift of Baptism, which establishes every disciple of Jesus Christ as equal in God's sight. One of the strongest elements of the document is its identification of five ecumenical imperatives. They assert that Catholics and Lutherans 1) should emphasize unity rather than division; 2) must let themselves continuously be transformed through encounter the other; 3) should commit themselves to seek visible unity; 4) should jointly rediscover the power of Jesus Christ for our time; and 5) should witness together to the mercy of God in proclamation and service to the world.

These imperatives fit well with the theme of this conference, "Walking together the Path of Justice." Our commitment to walk together with others goes beyond fellow members of our global communion and even takes us outside the families of Christianity. With whom can we walk the path of justice?

"From Conflict to Communion" calls baptism "the basis for unity and common commemoration." It is the foundation of our shared witness. Our human tendency—in the church as well as in political relations—is to emphasize what divides us rather than what brings us together. My sense is that we have often provided too much emphasis on the

questions of the Holy Eucharist while ignoring the basic unity we find in Holy Baptism. But Baptism is what unites us and leads us to Eucharist. Through Water and the Word, we are engrafted into the church, the Body of Christ. In baptism, we are sent out into the world together for the sake of God's holistic mission, in diaconal purpose. This shared emphasis on baptism is the foundation for our shared mission.

Today, we must ask where are we going as a communion. We cannot know where we are going without a full self-understanding of who we claim to be. I am grateful that our self-understanding project is making progress, especially in our commitment to unity through pulpit and altar fellowship. This is especially the case when we consider our regional expressions. I am concerned that some approaches to regional identity could lead to church-tribal thinking. Being a Lutheran today is different than when the LWF was founded in 1947. My identity as an Arab Palestinian Lutheran Christian is directly connected with African spirituality, with the Asian appreciation of mystery, with the heritage of European enlightenment, with American inventiveness and ingenuity, all alongside Latin American liberation. Each of these strands have supported and informed me in the Communion to say that a Lutheran today is no more an individual designation. The communion has made me not just a global citizen but an interdependent Christian.

Breklum has long been a center for training and sending missionaries throughout the world. Theologies of mission have changed dramatically through the centuries. As we walk together the path toward justice, I ask you to consider anew what the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Northern Germany has to offer that will strengthen all of us as Lutherans. We appreciate your partnerships and our bilateral understandings, but what is it that is uniquely yours that you can offer to the global communion as a whole?

Grounded in Baptism and strengthened through the Eucharist, we are sent out into diaconal service. For centuries, both Catholics and Lutherans have engaged in vital, holistic ministry throughout the world. It is time for us to consider practical ways this work can be done together. The call to service and the call to mission cannot be separated. If we are doing one together, we are no doubt engaging in both together. Ephesians calls us to "bear with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Eph 4.2-6).

Before I close, I would, in the spirit of addressing the theme of justice, like to say a word about the crisis facing the Middle East. The near-constant stream of refugees fleeing conflict in Syria and Iraq is a testament to how unbearable life has become in those countries, if they are indeed still countries. As I wrote in an open letter at the beginning of this month, I myself am a refugee, as well as a bishop. Both my faith and my history oblige me to speak up for these women, men, and children who are washing up on beaches, are found decomposing in trucks on the highway, are crossing borders of barbed wire, and are barely surviving in makeshift camps. These precious children of God have been displaced as a result of poverty, violence, terror, and political conflict. Frustration and fear lead them to risk their lives and their life-savings in search of safe havens where they can live and

raise families in peace. We must remember that these are not “waves” or “masses” or “hordes”—these are human beings who deserve dignity and respect.

I would like to thank Germany and the German churches for offering the beginning of a positive response to this current challenge. But it is not just a German problem, or even a European problem. It is, rather, a critical challenge for contemporary global systems. Indeed, the existence of so many refugees throughout the world is a result of global systems, not merely several unconnected local crises. The international community has not helped solve the conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, including the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Economic and political interests have taken priority over peacemaking and dialogue. Our region has become so chaotic that it opens the door to extremists and terrorists; our people are becoming desperate. Many of these refugees are Christians. While we do not provide greater care to Christians because of our shared faith, we cannot ignore that the crises facing the Middle East disproportionately affect Christian communities. The Middle East needs justice and peace, not only to end the flow of refugees, but so that displaced people can return to their homes in dignity, and live in free democratic states.

For that to happen, we need to limit the flow of arms into the Middle East. Today, I ask each of you and your churches to join me in a call for an end to arms transfers to the entire Middle East. We already have enough weapons to destroy the Middle East 650 times over. We do not need any more tanks, any more nuclear submarines, any more fighter jets, any more missiles and bombs. We need justice, not more weapons.

For the dysfunction of the Middle East to be addressed, we must focus on resolving the Palestinian-Israel conflict. As many pragmatic political and religious leaders have said, resolving the conflict may not end fanaticism altogether, but we must remember that the conflict is one of the chief recruiters for extremists, whether they are Jews, Christians, or Muslims. Our communion recognizes that our commitment to a just two-state solution and a Jerusalem shared by two peoples and three religions is challenged by ongoing settlement activity in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. The Green Line—the armistice line that held until 1967—should be the unequivocal basis of negotiations for the borders of the State of Palestine and the State of Israel. The complexities of sharing Jerusalem should be addressed first, not held until the end of negotiations. The churches should be leading our governments in action on Israel and Palestine. Our calling as churches is to help create the political will for the solution to be implemented.

For our part, every educational institution of the ELCJHL will continue to encourage Palestinians to see the face of God in the Israelis and build relationships with Israelis so that one day they will see the face of God in us Palestinians. When we see the face of God in the Other, we will recognize one another’s humanity. This recognition of human dignity will lead us to mutually recognize and promote one another’s human, civil, religious, and political rights. Only then will the Holy Land become a land flowing with milk and honey for both Palestinians and Israelis alike.

My dear friends, we face many challenges. As a global communion, we know that we face these challenges *together*. We will again be strengthened in this collective witness when we

gather next year in Wittenberg with the German churches. There, we will bring the richness of our theology and history to the table. But we will also bring our vulnerability and our weakness. For only then, at the foot of the cross, will we discern how we can be reformed for the sake of the mission of God.

May God bless you, and may God bless this gathering.