

Catholicity and Diversity

Presented to the General Council of Mennonite World Conference

Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, USA, July 2015

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Introduction

I feel both privileged and humbled because of the opportunity to speak to you today. It is only some few years ago that our two communions engaged in an action that has redefined us Lutherans and our relationships with you, the Mennonites, in substantial ways. This happened through the so-called “Mennonite Action” during the Eleventh Assembly of the LWF in Stuttgart, Germany, in the year 2010. With that action, we Lutherans felt compelled to come before you to ask for your forgiveness for tolerated, if not instigated, violence perpetrated against you throughout history. We apologized for misrepresentations and wrong teachings about who you are and how you define yourselves. We were blessed with your forgiveness and continue to be amazed as we are carried by the power of reconciliation. The “Mennonite Action” has brought us so much closer together. Your forgiveness has helped us to continue engaging in much deeper conversation about issues we still see differently – a difference, however, that does not prevent us from seeking closer witness to the Triune God. Reconciliation has opened our eyes to our suffering neighbours in our world; it has opened our ears to hear the call to service, and opened our hands to generously support each other in that service.

Only five years have passed since that action in the city of Stuttgart. Seen against the background of almost five centuries of alienation and strained relations, your invitation to speak to you during your Global Assembly and General Council these days is another proof of your generosity, but foremost of God’s transforming power. I am aware of the immense privilege I am granted and I am deeply grateful to you for this.

Why is catholicity and diversity a theme?

Catholicity and diversity is the theme of my presentation. It is a theme that speaks in quite direct ways to our experience of being a communion of Lutheran churches. While witnessing locally as duly constituted churches, these same churches are at the same time called into global relationships. They share a journey as a communion in the LWF.

As they come together, regionally and globally they realize that they are in many ways so different. Some of these differences are perceived as great inspiration and enrichment; some others are perceived as challenging, if not alienating. When these challenging and even alienating experiences take place, the question around the core of what constitutes unity becomes acute, as well as the question about the nature of this unity. Conversely, questions around what diversity is all about come up, and what the boundaries of diversity would be.

These discernments in the body of Christ do not take place in a vacuum. To the contrary, they take place, and are often a reflection of the fact that our world is becoming polycentric, a world with many centers. There is no one centre anymore. Conflicting discourses, paradigms – often religiously tainted – contend for space, if not prevalence. The human family struggles with these new emerging global orders, attempting to connect the dots between these many evolving centres. New skills to engage in a culturally sensitive way in communication and relationships are required. I am not a friend of painting the world in dim colors, because I cannot but believe that even in those developments difficult to grasp, God is still the Lord of history. Yet, it is so evident that communication processes and relationships in our current times are under strain and pressure. We live in times of fragmentation, of withdrawal, of communication breakdowns.

As communities of faith, we are evidently exposed to these forces of fragmentation and

withdrawal. I believe it is essential for us to be aware of this fact while we follow God's call into unity. While hearing this divine call, centrifugal forces drive us apart. These centrifugal forces counter the centripetal forces that actually call us to be together: our common faith, our baptism. What is it then to be a Christian community in view of these countering forces? What is it to be a global communion, a federation or a conference of churches? What does unity mean, and how does this call into unity relate to the call into the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ? And here too, what constitutes the core of this truth? How do we name and articulate this non-negotiable core?

Inculturation of the gospel

"The full Gospel is non-negotiable." I heard this comment once in a discussion – an angry comment indeed. I sensed that this person was speaking out of a deep love to the gospel of Jesus Christ, which this person wanted to see whole, unbroken, speaking powerfully to all people as it was speaking to this person already.

Yet, isn't each single appropriation of the Gospel a result of large efforts of mediation and of negotiations? Member churches of the Lutheran World Federation, and I am sure also of the World Mennonite Conference, are shaped by their history and their theological, liturgical and spiritual traditions. They witness to the Gospel in different settings. They seek to have the Gospel speaking to a different set of experiences, questions and challenges that people and societies at large face in their respective contexts. Each member church continues to be in need of managing the complex interaction between Gospel and culture, hence finding ways of connecting the universal message of salvation through Jesus Christ to specific local cultural settings. The Gospel of Jesus Christ calls therefore for inculturation.

This is not a reality of recent days only. Inculturation of the Gospel has taken place from the very beginning, and hence all theology is always and fundamentally contextual theology. Each of us here in this room lives his or her faith on the basis of a prior inculturation process, and continues to be engaged in this permanent mediation process.

I want to underline the "*each of us*". Because at times it sounds as if contextual theologies would only be found in the South, assuming therefore that in some parts of the world there is contextual theology, while in other parts there is "theology". We speak of contextual theologies as present in Africa, in liberation movements, among Dalit people in India. But we would never speak of a mainstream theology in North America or in Europe to be contextual... The implicit asymmetry, if not hierarchy between these terms, is frightening.

We need to overcome this asymmetry, because it is not true that there would be a theology in our world, which wouldn't be contextual. Just let's go to the beginning, when the word became flesh in Jesus Christ. That word of God, Jesus Christ, got contextualized in the Holy Land first, a huge process of mediation between the divine and the earthly realm, for which Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection stand. And the way that divine Word was put into the words of the Bible carry the images, pictures, symbols and culture of the Holy Land.

Let me give an illustration. I remember when, last year, the LWF Council met under the theme "Like trees planted by streams of water", an Icelandic Council member confessed: "I don't know really what you are talking about: there aren't trees on our island!" Can you sense the huge effort required to connect the world of the Bible, basically the Middle East with its pictures, smells, images, with the world as it looks like in Iceland?

From the Holy Land the gospel moved to the Mediterranean Sea. That was already a first, impressive attempt of inculturation or contextualization. The difficulty and sensitivity of that process can be grasped while reading the book of Acts, and the letter of Paul to the Galatians – the story of the apostles as they met to handle their diversity while claiming their catholicity! That is my theme, and you can see that it is an old theme, as old as the church becoming the church. And that very fact is actually a helpful reminder that contextualization processes would always lead to renewed attention to questions of both the truth and the unity in the church, and how truth and unity relate to each other. The apostles showed us powerfully the way to

handle these complex questions about truth and unity: they handled them by coming together, gathering, reaching out to each other and lovingly and prayerfully engaging with each other. I want to be bold in this affirmation: to be the church in apostolic tradition also means to uphold this tradition of handling the differences and conflicts *together*. To be the church in apostolic tradition is to stick both to the faith of the apostles, *and* to the ways the apostles related to each other on the basis of this faith, even in difficult times. To be the church in apostolic tradition is to care about both: the truth of faith, and the unity of the church.

The reasons for “catholicity and contextuality”

I have constructed the question of catholicity and diversity by relating that diversity to the contextual nature of the church. Let me offer a bit more of substance related to the concepts of catholicity and contextuality. From there I want to move into understanding the dialectic tension that results from these two dimensions of being the church.

The global, catholic dimension of the church should not come as surprise in view of the words of the Apostolic Creed which we assiduously repeat for two millennia already, and which we use to confess the catholicity of the church as a reality. The implications of this confession of faith, however, only become apparent when brought to concretion, hence when the words pronounced while confessing faith seek to become expressed in tangible relationships. The Mennonite World Conference is an expression of such catholicity, as the Lutheran World Federation is too.

The way we in the LWF understand it, the call into togetherness is much more than a matter of convenience, it is more than a pragmatic approach to engage in a sort of “strategic global Lutheran alliance”. It rather speaks to the *need* of coming together because of who we are as the church and what in our Lutheran understanding constitutes the origin of both the church and of a global communion like the LWF: it is because of God’s living word. It is not strategic thinking, but God’s word that constitutes the basis of our togetherness.

In a document recently adopted by the LWF Council called “The Self-understanding of the Lutheran Communion”¹ this understanding of the communion as a gift is expressed with the following words:

*“This communion is alive because God calls it into being and sustains it. Living together as a communion of churches is a gift entrusted to the churches. In responding to God’s call, the LWF has committed itself to the ongoing realization of the communion. As a gift, the communion is something we receive”.*²

This understanding of communion relationships is built on the basis of the theology of communion (*koinonia*) as found in the New Testament, particularly in Paul’s letters. It is important to keep this understanding in mind. Because it reminds LWF member churches that ultimately none of them owns the LWF as an exclusive, privileged property, but that all of them own it jointly, as a shared space that God provides through God’s powerful word. It has been very helpful to be reminded of this fact, particularly in times when difference strains unity. We want to understand the relationships between the 145 member churches of the LWF as a gift of God. As such, communion relationships demand a special attention, a special accountability and a special responsibility. All this calls for mutuality both in relationships, and in the way this ownership is expressed.

Accordingly, the document mentioned above continues stating:

*“This gift, however, is also a task. Those who hear, see, feel, taste and smell the gospel, embrace the task of following Christ. This involves paths of diversity amidst unity. This gospel is not our project, but rather it projects us into the world for the sake of love, for the sake of God”.*³

It has helped us in our journey as a communion to frame issues on the basis of this understanding of our relationships as being both a gift and a task. Certainly, each of our member churches took at a certain point of their history a *decision* to join the LWF. Such a formal action is required. Yet, this formal action inscribes itself in the wider horizon of the

above-mentioned understanding of communion. The decision to join communion is always a second step, it is a response to what God offers as a gift.

One can see how demanding this call is by the ways our two global families, the Mennonite and the Lutheran, chose their names: Mennonite World *Conference*, and Lutheran World *Federation*. Why do we seem to prefer to use sociological categories to refer to the nature of our togetherness? Are we not shying away from the theological concept of “communion”, which would much better capture both the spiritual and ecclesial density of our togetherness as Christian World Communion, as well as its roots in God’s call?

In the case of the LWF this hesitation to use ecclesial terminology is probably an expression of the newness of the vocation of its member churches to respond to God’s call into communion relationships. It was only in 1947 that some Lutheran churches understood that they could not be all on their own anymore, but that they needed to found the LWF – for the sake of service, mutual support and joint witness in this world. And it was only in 1990 that LWF member churches understood that the word “federation” did not adequately describe the nature of their relationships, but that they had actually been called into “communion”. Yet, “federation” is still there – in our name, and in our heads.

Looking at this short joint history into which we continue to grow, it has become very important to me to remind our member churches that our ongoing journey into deeper relationships at a global level, our journey into communion, is a journey into uncharted land. There is no ready-made paradigm for us; we need to envision it, build it up, step by step. Because different than the ecclesiological self-understanding of other Christian World Communion, we think and understand the church from the local to the global, not the other way round. That self-understanding requires different paradigms and modalities when it comes to live into relationships at a global level. And because it is uncharted land we are entering, this self-understanding calls for creativity, theological coherence, but above all, for patience and love as we find out jointly how to express God’s call into communion, and how we accompany each other as we express these relationships.

But this shall be enough now around the catholicity of the church and the nature of communion relationships. Let’s now move into the contextual nature of the church. That dimension of being the church should not come as a surprise either. Because while our member churches are called into their unexpected “catholicity”, they continue to be called to witness to the crucified and risen Lord in their specific contexts, serving their people with their joys and pains in their houses and villages, and addressing issues of justice, healing and reconciliation as they are experienced in their daily lives. They offer the universal message of God’s love for the world and of God’s works of salvation in Jesus Christ to their specific local reality.

This is for me another key aspect to remember while trying to understand the dialectics between the contextual and the catholic dimension of our being the church. If the mission in which the church engages is God’s mission, and if God’s mission is so fundamentally shaped by the event of God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ, there is no other way to be in mission than by following this same path of incarnation, thus radically and compassionately engaging people and communities in their own context in which the Gospel of Jesus Christ is to be witnessed. The church is caught into that divine tide towards the world, towards human beings, as expressed in Jesus Christ. Hence the church cannot do other than to take that same direction, meeting and embracing both the people and their contexts, hence to become contextual.

Do you realize the complexity? Moved by that strong and powerful tide into context, the church is at the same time caught by a tide moving it outside its own contexts, calling it into a unity that originates in God’s word.

Dialectic tensions and the importance to withstand them

It is between these two poles within which we move and witness as churches. Catholicity

and contextuality – these terms frame the dialectic tension of being the church. A dialectic tension similar to many other dialectic tensions into which our common faith in the Triune God calls us: the eschatological tension between the “already there because Christ came, and the not-yet, because Christ is still to come”, for instance. Or the dialectic tension between lives lived according to the flesh, or according to the spirit, as the Apostle Paul writes.

The first example describes a temporal tension, the tension between the time of fulfillment of God’s works of salvation as being accomplished in Christ already, yet to be fulfilled in Christ. The importance to withstand this tension is evident. A faith that sees all accomplished in Christ, and does not see God’s new creation ahead, is a faith with no hope. Conversely, a faith which only waits for the new creation without seeing God’s presence in the world as it is, will forget to love, serve and uphold the dignity and value of the people of this world.

The second example describes the anthropological reality of the permanent struggle of competing and conflicting mindsets applied in life. Here again it is essential not to attempt to resolve the tension, but to withstand it. Because a faith that would not see the newness of humankind in Christ would end up in idolatry of the human condition, an uncritical reading of who we are. Conversely, a faith that would not be able to relate to the human condition ends up overburdening and alienating human beings.

The dialectic tension of contextuality and catholicity speaks to the reality of the differentiated spaces within which churches attempt to participate in God’s mission: they are always both local and global.

I would want to argue that for the sake of the church we should always try to hold these two dimensions together as well. Giving up on either of them, running away from this tension, would imply the considerable risk of losing a significant dimension of what it is to be the church.

The LWF document “Mission in Context” from the year 2004 states this in drastic words:
*The Christian faith, for all its universality, is also culturally bound. Faith is by nature incarnational, firmly committed to a time, a place, and a culture. As local congregations endeavor to engage in mission, they must seek a balance between locality and universality, for universality and particularity are inseparably connected with each other. Without the universal communion of faith, each local church is unable to find a genuine self-understanding in the local context. For the church in mission, therefore, catholicity or universality without contextuality leads to imperialism, and contextuality without catholicity leads to provincialism.*⁴

That is then the gift and the task of being churches in communion relationships. It is about understanding the need of, and giving the space to each member church to be the church in its context, hence avoiding an alienating cultural and theological imposition or hegemony on each other; and it is to understand the need of each member church to connect to its catholicity, hence avoiding cultural captivity, or absolutism.

Navigating the tensions of catholicity and diversity: our own journey

In the LWF, this tension between local and global, between contextuality and catholicity has led us to navigate both calm and rough waters during our journey of almost 70 years. Back in the 1950s, the core question of our theological identity – the doctrine of justification by faith alone – generated important conflicts. It was so difficult to communicate about this doctrine that is at the heart of Lutheran theology, because both the entry points and the concerns among LWF churches were so different. To put it in a simplified way: churches in the North Atlantic realm were keen to discuss the subtle workings of justification; churches in the global South, however, wanted a discussion about the missing connections between justification and justice.

Some two decades later, it was the question of the apartheid system in Africa and its implications for the LWF communion that originated considerable tension. The LWF member churches needed to relate to the fact that people were denied access to the table of the Lord on the basis of their race. It was a painful process, which however also led to an important clarification of the self-understanding of the LWF. Actually, that very conflict represented the turning point in the LWF's life, because member churches then grasped that their identity as a global federation is one of an ecclesial communion – and that's why the question of the access to the table of the Lord became so fundamental.

The conflict around apartheid did not tear the churches or the LWF apart, as many feared, but led them to a deeper awareness of their own identity, to closer relations, to deeper communion. To me this is a permanent reminder that conflicts, if well handled, with the apostolic commitment of discerning truth jointly, have also their potentials of helping to grow the church and an entire communion into new levels of maturity and into further consolidation of their theological identity.

And then again some two to three decades later, the questions about family, marriage and human sexuality, which have erupted as an important tension in the LWF, require until this very day important efforts to counter their potential to divide.

With this reference, let me move now to the final part of my presentation, in which I want to offer glimpses into that discussion process through which we have journeyed, and what we have learned and understood thus far.

Withstanding the tensions: accountability while dealing with difference

“Why do we have to discuss these issues at all?” This has been a question often raised. It conveys pain, if not even embarrassment. It reflects the difficulties and the stress that such a discussion imposes on those members of the LWF, for whom there are no real entry points for discussion because of their own contexts – including political, legal, social, cultural, theological, ecumenical or interreligious reasons.

I assume that my preceding words have given already a rationale for the unavoidability of this discussion: it is because of the Gospel. That Gospel with its immense power to spread all over the world leaves us, like the apostles in the first hours of the church, with big questions to deal with. Further, that same gospel, powerful as it is, calls us into unity as well.

And there is also a reason, which my predecessor, Rev. Dr. Ishmael Noko presented in powerful ways to the LWF governing bodies: as long as these are issues that some of the LWF member churches have to relate to, these issues can't be declared unilaterally as closed. Relationships of mutuality call for that solidarity and accompaniment, even when it is about going many of the biblical extra miles. I always like to remind people that this expression of mutuality and solidarity was there, very real and present, when the whole of the LWF felt it needed to engage in the question of apartheid – not because the apartheid system was a reality for all of them, but because apartheid became so much a theological and political question for some, that it got so important implications for all.

It was in the year 1995 when my same predecessor alerted the LWF Council for the first time that there was a social, political and theological debate going on. He called attention to *“growing concern within member churches and indeed throughout the ecumenical community [on] the church's pastoral and social response to the questions relating to human sexuality”*.⁵ The report proposed starting “a process of consultation to facilitate a dialogue on these issues and to identify areas of convergence in our differing responses”⁶.

Unfortunately, this recommendation, although approved by the Council, was never followed up. There must have been very good reasons for it. But as a consequence of this lack of follow up, the LWF as a global communion of churches missed the opportunity to proactively provide assistance to member churches to handle the relational implications of these discussions by creating spaces, framing the theological discussions, helping the global

process. Since then the LWF has been reacting to events and developments, mediating alienations and even bilateral ruptures. The lesson we have taken is that although difficult, a proactive approach is more conducive to foster mutual understanding and unity.

This could be seen at our Tenth Assembly in Winnipeg, Canada, in the year 2003, where the discussions about human sexuality, that were requested by some in view of their own contextual realities and theological convictions, met several churches, let alone many of their delegates, totally unprepared. It became a very difficult Assembly, as you can imagine, which by the power of the Spirit remained united. It led to the establishment of a Task Force that was mandated to develop a document under the name "Family, Marriage and Sexuality" to help the process further.

The report of the Task Force was presented to the LWF Council in 2007. It didn't offer only biblical and theological substance to undergird conversations, but also "guidelines for dialogue", a methodological support on how to engage in discussions around complex issues. The Council received the report and adopted the guidelines. It established a "five-year period for respectful discussions within and among the LWF member churches".⁷

Since then we have learned, once more, that the publication of a report, without proactively securing reception processes within and among member churches, does not bring any change to realities. This is true for ecumenical processes, as it is true for any other process in the ecumenical movement. As a side comment: this is what makes me so grateful for the joint engagement between Mennonites and Lutherans who, after the Mennonite Action to which I referred at the beginning of my presentation, are working on the "implementation", meaning the practical implications, of the reconciliation in 2010.

Preparing for the Assembly in Stuttgart, a thorough consultation took place to agree jointly on how to face the discussions on family, marriage and sexuality. Having learned the lessons from the preceding Assembly, and also understanding that the five-year process was still underway, these consultations advised "that these issues not be dealt with by the Assembly but that the process be allowed to continue until 2012 as originally recommended..."⁸

In 2012, this five-year process came to an end. After clarifying that the LWF Council would not sanction a position of the LWF on these issues, it became too clear that conversations had not been intense and deep enough. The Council as a whole dealt with both the questions and their implications for the ongoing journey as a communion. As an outcome of that discussion, the Council stated:

- "Respectful and dignified dialogues on complex issues are possible.
- The unique situation of each member church has to be acknowledged.
- The LWF is a communion with many themes.
- The LWF communion as a whole should not take action on issues of family, marriage and sexuality.
- The LWF journey as a communion of churches continues."⁹

Currently, the LWF is working on three processes and projects directly related to these questions:

Biblical hermeneutics: an international group has been working now for four years on the question of what informs our reading of the Bible, a book that all of the LWF member churches love and want to take seriously, yet seems to be providing for such different conclusions. What are the lenses that inform our reading? The process, which has already produced important publications¹⁰, will be concluded by the Assembly in the year 2017 in Stuttgart.

Self-understanding of the communion. A report was just adopted by the LWF Council on the self-understanding of the LWF, and in particular around the questions of the autonomy of each member church and its accountability to the global journey as a communion. Guidance is offered on the resources for accountable decision-making.¹¹ Having learned the lesson about reception processes, we are currently designing the discussion and response process

that would lead the communion towards its Assembly in 2017.

Processing differences – A guideline is being prepared that would support member churches to deal with differences and mediation processes, both internally and among them, in a proactive and structured way. The background of these guidelines is to support churches to envisage a variety of tools and mechanisms to handle their differences without necessarily having to resort to the severing of ties as the immediate and first option. The key issue here will be the question how to create an accountability framework around such guidelines, once they are developed.

Conclusion

You can see from this journey and our current projects, also from the important efforts to develop both theological and methodological resources, that the call into communion is indeed a call into uncharted land. This is where we are right now, hoping to be able to develop both the theological and methodological resources, so that future generations will hold these resources in their hands when they are faced with their own questions, probably totally different than ours today, yet equally important as they live out God's call to be the church both on the ground and globally. Already the apostles faced those questions. We faced them in the past; we face them now. Others will face them in the future. As long as we face them together, with a strong commitment to both the truth of the gospel and the unity of the church, we are indeed the church as it began to unfold in times of the apostles.

Therefore, please pray for us, in the LWF, as will pray for you, in the MWC, so that God continues leading us while we live into our catholicity, yet embracing our diversity while we do so. As long as the tensions resulting from this journey are there we can be convinced that all is right; we are still following our Lord Jesus Christ and witnessing to the Triune God. Because it is the Triune God who calls us into both: into compassionate witness to and among our people, and into relationships of communion.

Endnotes:

¹ www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Exhibit%209.2%20The%20Self-Understanding%20of%20the%20Lutheran%20Communion.pdf

² Ibid page 5.

³ Ibid. page 7

⁴ Ibid. page 29-30

⁵ The following paragraphs are based on the document "A chronological compilation of key official LWF discussions and decisions on Family, Marriage and Sexuality 2011 – 2013"
www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/LWF-Emmaus_chronological_compilation1995-2013.pdf

The quote is from page 1.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid. page 5

⁸ Ibid, page 6

⁹ Ibid, page 11

¹⁰ See for instance www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/LWF-DTPW-DOC_59_Psalms.pdf

¹¹ See: www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Exhibit%209.2%20The%20Self-Understanding%20of%20the%20Lutheran%20Communion.pdf