

Message of the LWF European Pre-Assembly 2023

“Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.” (Romans 12:12)

We met in Mansfield College, Oxford, from 21 to 24 March 2023 as participants in a joint Pre-Assembly of the three LWF European regions. Together, as a communion representing all of the LWF churches on our continent, we have been preparing for the Thirteenth Assembly in Krakow in September, reflecting on its theme of ‘One Body, One Spirit, One Hope’. Together, we have worshiped, shared our joys and sorrows on the road from Windhoek to Krakow and jointly discerned issues affecting us in our various contexts.

We expect the discussions in Krakow to focus on witnessing to hope in the midst of a suffering world. Hope is the affirmation that God is faithful and will complete what God has begun. Hope is a gift of the Holy Spirit, but also a task for us all. With the climate crisis, environmental degradation, war and conflicts, forced migration, economic inequality, populism, authoritarianism and rising nationalism, we find ourselves searching for credible and transformative hope. We need to find a clearer understanding of what Christian discipleship means in this context.

The war against Ukraine, the refugee crisis and other ongoing conflicts are increasingly challenging the churches and our Christian theology. We continue to support a just peace in Ukraine. Many moral and ethical questions are provoked and inequalities revealed. There is a need to work on our theology of peace and self-defense, questioning how we can be peacemakers in our time. At a practical level, LWF responded as one body to the Ukraine crisis and this, for us, is an expression of hope.

We recognize the damage we are doing to our ecosystems, worsening the climate crisis. This is a sin against God's creation. We know that we have not done enough to battle environmental degradation and the loss of biodiversity. The imbalance between those polluting and those suffering its consequences continues to grow. At its core, this is about power and preserving life. Much needs to change, including our own lifestyles and our commitment to addressing inequalities. Climate justice needs to be at the core of all of our considerations. There is a need to work on our ecotheology, to accelerate efforts towards reaching carbon neutrality by 2030 and to advocate more strongly for climate refugees.

The Covid19 pandemic marked a turning point for the churches, affecting all of our communities in multiple ways. We were challenged by rapid learning of new means of communication and being together. While we need to ask if there were losses beyond repair, we also need to identify the gains on which we can build.

As a consequence of these multiple crises, people are increasingly struggling to find meaning in their life or searching for a community where they can belong and feel fully valued. There is more awareness of mental health issues, yet stigma and isolation continue to prevent people from speaking about their needs. As a Communion, we need to work on our theology of mental health and play our role in building reciprocity and mutual care in our localities.

At the same time, these crises have also made us more aware of our call to become a more diaconal church. As European churches, we have been engaged in a fruitful process of Conviviality, learning how to serve our neighbors as we live out our Baptismal vocation.

In a context of declining membership, where we are challenged to remain relevant in responding to people's spiritual needs, we must find new ways of being church. This includes new and more accessible language for our worship and theology, as well as a more effective presence in social media. Our sharing of the Gospel needs to make better use of the gifts present among our youth and lay members, enabling us to reach out and engage with diverse audiences.

In light of the deepening economic crisis affecting our churches, the priorities and role of the LWF needs to be re-evaluated to ensure its sustainability into the future. This is not simply a question of financial resources. We note the introduction of a new mutual accountability process to better define relationships between our churches.

Globally, we witness a push-back on human rights and gender justice. Religion is too often used as an argument to justify the push-back. We also know that the pandemic led to a sharp rise in gender-based violence. As we mark the 10th anniversary of LWF's gender justice policy, we recognize that we have made progress in expressing and accepting diversity as a sign of God's good creation. At the same time, we recognize that there continues to be a great need to talk about human sexuality and act for gender justice within our own midst.

We want to be more inclusive and accessible churches. This means that we need to examine our past and present, dealing more honestly with issues of racism, exclusion and violence. No one should be discriminated against, particularly on the basis of their race, ethnicity or gender. We need to strengthen our own democratic structures and participatory approaches, empowering women, youth and lay leaders and offering more opportunities for intergenerational cooperation.

Rooted in one hope, we are united in one body by one Spirit. We acknowledge the rich diversity within the Communion. For us unity does not mean uniformity. At the same time, it is important to understand the practical implications of living as a communion of Lutheran churches. **We need to continue to listen to each other carefully and not to give up on one another for convenience or for indifference. We must find ways of dealing with questions which could be Communion dividing in courageous and respectful ways.** With Christ in our center, we believe that unity in reconciled diversity is possible.