
B. God's Healing Gift of Communion



The communion we share as Lutherans is God's gift for the sake of the world. The healing power of prayer and the Eucharist transform us into a communion of love. Yet, within this communion of churches, there still are significant differences and wounds, related to significant historical struggles and political changes (e.g., the end of Communism or apartheid), generational and theological differences (e.g., who can be ordained), ethnic or cultural identities and disparities in size and finances. Where are forgiveness, healing and reconciliation especially needed in this communion? How can communication support and build up the communion, for the sake of the world?

A communion

Since the Lutheran World Federation was established in 1947 it has undergone transformation in its self-understanding. This transformation has gone hand in hand with a confessional and spiritual bonding that has taken place among the member churches, as a result of their working together within the framework of LWF, and in relationship to the wider ecumenical developments.

To what extent have we, as a communion, experienced a healing process in the form of physical, theological and spiritual transformation during our life and work together? How does being a communion have the potential to bring healing to the churches, as well as to the world? From the perspective of our different constituencies, how do we understand healing in the first place? How does the theme of this Assembly challenge us to look into different dimensions of healing, some of which we may have neglected? (see the chapter on “The Church’s Ministry of Healing”) What possibilities do the concept and positive experience of being a communion of churches hold for the new challenges and problems we experience together? (see the chapter on “Transforming Economic Globalization”) In what other ways is communion proving to be a viable concept? On what new directions and implications of being a communion should the LWF focus?

For many decades, the LWF understood itself as a free association of churches carefully respecting the autonomy and integrity of the member churches. The problem that surfaced was how to couch the free association concept in theological terms. Theological studies, along with the spiritual affinity and trust that developed over the years, led to a searching for a much more focused self-definition. For many years, particularly during the 1980s, more specific attention was given to whether the LWF was not something much more than a bureaucratic arm of the member churches, which “free association” implied. Did the LWF have a church character or not? If so, how and to what extent?

It was in the context of this search that the theological concept of communion emerged. Communion is not a new concept, but is a part of the biblical and confessional traditions of the church. The Apostle Paul, for one, uses its Greek original, *koinonia*, thirteen times. It is also translated with other words, depending on the context.¹

What was new about the word “communion” was its use in the self-understanding of the LWF. This generated theological discussion and research in order to address the questions and issues at stake.² Communion implies pulpit and altar fellowship and mutual recognition of

ministries, but in some places even this minimal understanding of what it means to be a communion is not practiced. Furthermore, communion must go deeper into other forms of sharing and solidarity.

In seeking to define theologically and structurally the nature of unity sought in the bilateral confessional talks, the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC also explored the possibilities offered by the concept of communion. Communion was seen to be less ambiguous and with richer theological content than the over-used concept of unity, which can also be applied to the socio-political arena.³ It is within this wider ecumenical understanding of *communio* that the LWF understands itself as a communion.

Even though the subject of communion was discussed during the deliberations of the 1984 LWF Assembly in Budapest, the communion terminology was not adopted as a constitutional formula of self-understanding. It was not until the 1990 Curitiba Assembly that “free association” of churches was replaced with “communion” of churches in the LWF Constitution (para. III). This self-understanding was further elaborated on in the Assembly Message with words such as “spiritual,” “sacramental,” “confessional,” “witnessing” and “serving.”⁴

Since then, the practical meaning and full implications of being a communion

have continued to be debated. They were perceived and experienced differently within the LWF constituency, and muted reservations have persisted, particularly in some large churches of the North. After all these years of discussing the concept of communion, it is important that this Assembly clarify where we are today in understanding and living out what it means to be a communion.

The title of this Village Group suggests that our life in communion is God's healing gift. It is this not only in the sense that life in communion comes with the gift of salvation, but also because this old, biblical term has become a fresh means to help Lutheran churches understand who they are jointly and individually.

The linkage between the concepts of communion and healing breaks new ground in the mainstream Lutheran tradition, in both theological and practical ways. While healing is a commonly used metaphor that points to the process of renewal, restoration and transformation, its basic literal meaning, particularly as found in the healing ministry of Jesus Christ, is also suggested by the overall theme of this Assembly.

Healing in our experiences as a communion

Participation of member churches in the LWF

As a result of the constitutional amendments adopted at the Eighth Assembly, there has been a wider and deeper participation of member churches in the various units of the LWF. The extent of this participation does not usually depend on the size or location of the member churches, or on their financial contribution toward the operational budget of the LWF. As a result, the LWF is no longer a benevolent Lutheran body dominated by European

and American churches of the North, and in which churches of the South are merely accommodated, if not tolerated.

Furthermore, there is a growing sense of shared responsibility. The "business" of the LWF no longer takes place only in Geneva. Considerable investment and efforts have been made to develop and support the regions which now share some of the responsibilities. The aim has been to bring the work of the LWF closer to the level and experience of its member churches. This has also resulted in the regions being the place where a lively and deepened sense of what it means to be a communion is especially manifest, for example, in Africa and Latin America. As one African church leader put it, "We have a real feeling of being a communion—knowing each other and not just knowing churches abroad." A foundation of communion relationships based on trust, rather than on material circumstances or church background, has been established. Continuing efforts needed in this area will be considered later.

Discuss how this has, or has not, been your church's experience and perception. Do you agree with this assessment?

Creative listening to one another

This listening is taking place in the context of reports, applications for grants, deliberations on issues, sharing of insights and differing viewpoints during various LWF forums. Creative listening here means opening up and looking beyond oneself in order to hear all the concerns and cries of the other. It is more than an auditory exercise.

Part of what a relationship of love involves—which is at the heart of communion—is opening oneself up to others and to what is necessary in a given situation. This entails making oneself vulnerable, sometimes to the point of experiencing and en-

during the pain of being criticized or seemingly ignored. We then become vulnerable without feeling threatened by others.

At the relational level, this is what it means to take up one's cross and to follow Jesus. What we need to hear does not always come in pleasant tones and substance. The imperative of listening exacts its dues. A relationship of mutual listening is based on the dynamics of love and trust, rather than on the assumption of trying to change the other.

There is a sense in which listening is an active service of love. It goes beyond the passive openness of a listening ear. The deepest level of communication takes place in the life of communion, where the gap between speaker and hearer is bridged by the imperative of this mutual existence. In listening to one another in this manner, we grow together, minimizing our weaknesses and maximizing our strengths. We ourselves experience healing, and hopefully also become a more healing Lutheran communion.

In what kinds of situations has this listening been especially important? Where is it especially needed in the Lutheran communion today? How can communication technologies and resources assist in this?

Sharing resources

This is taking place through,

- **LWF programs:** The level of sharing of resources in the form of the exchange of persons, scholarship grants, development aid and theological perspectives has been deepened. There has been an exchange of persons and ideas not only between churches of the North and South, but also between South and South and between North and North.
- **Bilateral programs of companionship and partnership:** These are car-

ried out through partnership and companionship programs of member churches. Ideally, the parties involved are free to negotiate the details of how they will interact and cooperate. The programs cover a wide range of areas, such as development aid, joint projects, group visits and advocacy for justice and peace.

- **Volunteer programs:** Persons volunteer to offer their services at no cost to another church for a specific period or a particular project. For example, church-based teams under the auspices of organizations such as *Habitat for Humanity International*, and in cooperation with the local church, have built simple, affordable houses in poor neighborhoods in partnership with those in need of adequate shelter. In one case, they have built and helped staff a whole university.
- **Leadership summits:** There have also been bilateral and multilateral leadership summits wherein bishops/presidents and other leaders (including women and youth) of member churches exchange experiences garnered from their sphere of service. Through them, leaders have learned that what they, for example, think are unique problems in their particular church are actually problems that transcend particular contexts and may be rooted in human nature.

As helpful as these bilateral relationships are, do they sometimes operate in ways that are paternalistic or work at cross purposes with the multilateral relationships of the communion? If so, how can this be changed?

New experiences of worship life

Within the communion, there has been a considerable exchange of liturgical and musical traditions and resources. Liturgical renewal has been experienced among many member churches, and in recent decades, a rediscovery of worship as the power engine of life in communion.⁵

It now is common among many churches to celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion every Sunday and in some, even during the week. The sacramental aspects and impact of worship are more deeply appreciated and celebrated. In, with and under the liturgical acts of prayer, singing and bodily gestures, people have experienced what it means to be one, and to be together with one another in the Lord, across linguistic and cultural barriers. The visible, human and corporate act of worship provides the setting for God's healing presence.

The ecumenical charismatic movement has also affected the Lutheran churches. In the context of worship, some churches have experienced manifestations of the spiritual gifts of powerful preaching, teaching and the physical healing of diseases. Usually this is accompanied by large numbers of people attending Sunday and other services, since the worship service is viewed as mediating the experience of healing.⁶

The Lutheran sense that the sermon is the central point of worship should also be understood to mean that through proclamation, God's active Word breaks through and permeates all parts of worship, whether through words, silence or the simple, bodily language of liturgical gestures. Where two or three are gathered in the Lord's Name, God is at work through them to plan and to bring to effect what is pleasing to God (Mt 18:20; Phil 2:13). This happens not only during the sermon or homily. The whole service becomes the drama and the environment

of the healing activity of God's Word among God's people.

Although Lutheran theology emphasizes the Word, we must be aware of the danger of considering words as the sole medium through which we interact with God. This can result in an idolatry of words. As Elizabeth Templeton reminds us, when words get in the way of people's silent encounter with God in worship, they can become demonic. Sharing with those who cannot hear or speak the experience of the presence of God in worship is part of inclusive worship.⁷ Therefore, we must learn to be open to this further dimension of worship, which lies beyond the cacophony of words, and wherein we become truly "lost in wonder, love and praise."

Worship furthermore provides the theological underpinnings and social framework for serving and healing the world. That happens when worship is allowed to remind us of those who are not there, but who should be there, namely the rest of the world.

How has your worship life been enriched or renewed through the sharing of liturgical resources or practices from other churches?

Communion as a means for healing the world

Through service in the world: Through financial grants and seconded personnel, member churches, particularly those in the South, have been able to create social service infrastructures. This has resulted in establishing and developing various kinds of diaconal work within the territories of these churches. This work helps to alleviate hunger, pain and suffering among people. Scholarships and training programs help in developing human resources for continuing work in this area.

Through international diaconia: The LWF witnesses through service in situa-



tions of disaster and need throughout the world, offering a healing presence to individuals, communities and nations. With a commitment to contribute toward making the world more just and peaceful, the LWF offers support to refugee populations and internally displaced persons, empowerment to local communities to claim their rights, programs for healing and reconciliation in post-conflict situations and public policy advocacy.

Through the church's prophetic ministry: In addition to diaconal service, the prophetic ministry of the church has been one of the most effective means of addressing and transforming the world. Based on the mandate of the Word of God as well as ongoing analyses of situations today, the LWF and its member churches have drawn attention to specific situations of injustice, oppression and conflict in society and, at the same time, challenged governments and other institutions to adopt humane policies and

practices consistent with norms of justice and peacemaking.

This prophetic ministry is increasingly viewed not as separate from but as an important aspect of the church's more traditional diaconal work. This linkage, which needs to be encouraged throughout the LWF constituency, was the focus of the 2002 global consultation on diaconia, "Prophetic Diaconia: For the Healing of the World."

Through supporting local communities to claim their rights: Advocacy is the right and responsibility of all communities as they claim their rights to build sustainable lives for themselves and their children. Within the LWF communion, member churches, on their own and with others, seek to support communities in these efforts. This involves, for example, assisting local women's groups to gain economic independence, empowering rural communities to claim their rights to water and land, building the capacity of workers to negotiate for fair labor conditions and assisting refugees who seek justice. In all these ways, the inherent dignity of all persons is recognized as people become engaged in building their lives and futures.

Through solidarity or advocacy groups: When political activists are silenced and imprisoned, the voice of church groups keeps the liberation fires burning. For example, solidarity and advocacy groups, which sprung up in European and North American Lutheran churches during the struggle for liberation in Southern Africa, served to heal the world. They did this by mobilizing the whole church and the international community to focus on specific moral issues, thereby globalizing the problems of injustice and oppression. Similar efforts since then have focused on the Dalits in India and Palestinians in the Middle East.

The advocacy groups have made and continue to make a tremendous contribution, not only in inspiring hope among the

Without such a prophetic ministry of the church, for example, it would have taken longer for countries like South Africa and Namibia to be liberated. This was particularly important because the apartheid government had silenced and imprisoned political activists, forcing many of them into exile. Thus, for many decades, the church was the only institution that established a healing presence by speaking on behalf of the people and advocating the causes they espoused. More recent examples where the LWF has been very involved are international campaigns to ban landmines and to cancel external debts of highly indebted countries.

oppressed in far-away countries, but also in lobbying and urging national governments to adopt progressive and liberating policies. In addition to lobbying governments, some communities have been mobilized to boycott the products of countries with oppressive regimes, and individuals encouraged to withdraw their investments from companies operating in or dealing with countries with those regimes. Financial resources generated by these groups and their churches have helped pay for the legal costs of those charged for political activity and for the support of the dependants of political prisoners.

Healing in the face of new challenges to the Lutheran communion

Communion and diversity

The coexistence of the quest for Lutheran unity through the concept of communion, and the historical phenomenon of territorial and national churches is both an asset and a problem. National and cultural diversity within the Lutheran family has been an occasion for mutual enrichment. Churches can gain and learn much from one another.

Diversity can heal or divide the communion. It heals by making available a variety of resources and experiences as a means of expressing the love we share. The test of the authenticity of a communion is when it is able to manifest itself under circumstances of diversity, in-

cluding those leading to real tensions. We often experience the reality of this during meetings such as an Assembly.

Diversity can divide when its resources are used for self-serving ends. This happens, for example, when controversial, local issues are internationalized and introduced on the global agenda without the exercise of necessary pastoral sensitivity. We face a similar danger when congregations introduce radical practices out of context with the broad consensus of the member church. Under those circumstances, diversity can plant seeds of anarchy within the local communion.

What are the critical situations in the world where these solidarity, advocacy and related strategies are especially needed? How should they be developed and mobilized within the communion?

There is another side of the coin. In the interest of promoting and implementing new practices, arising from new theological insights, the communion may commit the sin of impatience at the global level. It can do this by taking collective steps, calculated to punish a member church for failing or being too slow to implement certain practices.

Authentic diversity always serves the interest of the communion. The solution lies in keeping a healthy balance between unity and diversity. It was the intention of Article VII of the Augsburg Confession to enunciate the principle of balance between unity and diversity. According to this Article, diversity is permissible as long as there is agreement concerning

“the preaching of the gospel and the administration of sacraments.” This served the Lutheran family well particularly at a time when internal Lutheran unity around the question of justification was the main issue at stake. But what about now?

Do you agree with this analysis? What are some specific examples of where this has or might occur? How can pastoral sensitivity be balanced with prophetic critique?

Communion and the crisis of norms

In our times, the list of theological and ethical issues crying out for consideration, deliberation and consensus is increasing. The social, cultural, economic and political environment in which many member churches of the LWF minister, has undergone rapid changes. As a result, churches face new problems and challenges, which call for new solutions and answers. At the same time, the understanding of the authority and meaning of Scripture has also undergone methodological, ideological and conceptual transformation, depending on where you are within the LWF's constituency.

The Constitution acknowledges the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments “to be the only source and norm of its doctrine, life and service” (para. II). However, what was previously considered self-evident in Scripture is, in the case of some specific issues, no longer understood that way. In other words, the normative character of Scripture as it relates to concrete issues, is no longer transparent and self-evident. A greater diversity in Scripture itself is now increasingly acknowledged. Consideration must also be given to such matters as cultural contexts then and now, how we understand and analyze the question at stake, the role of reason, experience and other factors. The consequence is that today there is bound to be a variety of ways of looking at many social and moral issues.

For a world communion such as the LWF, this may create a variety of answers to the same moral or ecclesial question. Two current examples are how we understand family, gender and sexuality from a Christian perspective (see the chapter on “Justice and Healing in Families”) and who can be ordained. For a communion to remain a communion there must be a store of shared spiritual and moral values. But, how much is necessary? Where there is a perceived dispute over values and principles, processes are needed for deliberating and arbitrating the dispute. The communion needs some shared norms that safeguard its integrity. There are actual or potential splits already within the communion due perhaps in part to a weakening of previously undisputed normative principles.

Church splits within the communion

Recent years have seen divisive disputes within and among LWF member churches. Significant efforts have been made, by LWF staff as well as by other member churches, to resolve these disputes. However, when churches feel they lack normative, spiritual and moral principles of arbitration, they take their disputes to secular courts. When a mutually accepted outcome is not reached through court action, a schism may result. The part of the church that has broken away then applies for LWF membership, which often is accepted. These are disturbing trends.

When the LWF understood itself as “a free association of churches,” this did not create as much of a problem as it does now when the LWF understands itself in spiritual and theological terms, as a communion of churches. A communion

What should be done in these situations? What role should the LWF and member churches play?

Do you agree with this assessment? Are common ethical norms required to keep the communion together? How would these be arrived at, and what authoritative weight would they carry within the communion? How much diversity is possible, on theological grounds? What further attention should the Department for Theology and Studies be giving to these matters? (see the Six Year Report)

of churches should not mean a communion of splitting churches.

Communion and the unequal distribution of resources

We cannot expect an equal distribution of financial and other resources. There are bound to be differences. Yet, the huge discrepancies within the communion have an historical background and are largely due to policies and practices of international financial institutions today. They follow a North/South pattern illustrated by the fact that many countries in the South owe countries in the North significant debts.

There are difficulties in living out communion in relation to money and power. In the LWF the problem is that most of the material resources to help churches in the South come from the North. These discrepancies are not only tied to global politics and economics, but threaten the spiritual life of what it means to be a communion. This is especially the case if we take Luther's understanding seriously, namely, that through the communion "we are changed into one another and are made into a community by love."⁸

The sharing of spiritual and material gifts, which is implicit in communion, cannot be isolated from examining the causes of inequities in wealth and joining with others to change such.⁹

This is especially urgent amid today's reality of economic globalization, which we as a communion must continue to address. (See the chapter on "Transforming Economic Globalization")

Some new directions to consider

- **Promoting spirituality:** There is a general decline in spirituality in many member churches. The way this phenomenon manifests itself differs from church to church, and from culture to culture. Generally, it may mean having a materialistic attitude to life, lack of prayer life, having a vague knowledge of the Word of God and a decline in other spiritual practices. In addition to the study and resources that the Office for Worship and Congregational Life has recently published, there is a need to consider new ways of promoting spiritual life in community, such as
 - forming prayer groups during and continuing after the Assembly,
 - developing an LWF cycle of prayers for use by member churches,
 - having occasional healing services, such as those that are a part of the Assembly worship.
- **Sharing stories of how communion is being experienced and lived out:** The Lutheran constituency is very rich and diverse. Often, what is happening in one

From your perspective, what tensions and problems do these disparities in financial resources raise within the communion? How should these be addressed?

place is not known in another. There is a need to promote forums for sharing simple stories about experiencing communion and life in general. This should be done in ways that recognize that not all churches have access to modern tools of communication.

- **Use biblical models for pooling resources:** One of the striking features of the Early Church was that the newly established churches founded by Paul were actually helping the mother church in

What additional ideas do you have for how the communion and its witness in the world can be strengthened?

Jerusalem. This and other biblical models can be developed to help us face the problem of sharing resources equitably. How might such models apply to North/South global church dynamics?

- **Promote joint action ventures:** Joint ventures were very effective during the struggles for liberation in Southern Africa, for example. What other models of joint action should be identified and promoted today?
- **Consider changing the name of the LWF to reflect our communion reality:** More on this subject will come in a report and recommendations to the Assembly.

Notes

¹ John Reumann, "Koinonia in Scripture: Survey of Biblical Texts," in Thomas Best and Günther Gassmann (eds.), *On the Way To Fuller Communion, Official Report of the Fifth World Conference On Faith and Order, Faith and Order Paper No. 166* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1994), p. 39.

² See Eugene Brand, "Toward a Lutheran Communion: Pulpit and Altar Fellowship," *LWF Report 26* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1988).

³ See, for instance, *On the Way to Fuller Communion, op.cit.* (note 1), particularly the Report of the Director, Günther Gassmann, "Montreal 1963—Santiago de Compostella 1993," p.14. See also relevant essays in Alan Falconer (ed.), *Faith and Order in Moshi: The 1996 Commission Meeting, Faith and Order Paper No 177* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1998).

⁴ *Official Proceedings of the Eighth Assembly, LWF Report No 28/29* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1990), p. 81.

⁵ See "Lutheran Churches in Transition: Summary of Challenges and Proposals," in

Wolfgang Greive (ed.), *Between Vision and Reality: Lutheran Churches in Transition, LWF Documentation 47* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2001), p. 23.

⁶ For example, in parts of Madagascar and Tanzania. See Josiah Kibira, "Revival in Tanzania," in *Lutheran World 21:3*, p. 282.

⁷ Elizabeth Templeton, "Towards the Realization of Common Life," in *On the Way to Fuller Communion, op. cit.* (note 1), p. 119.

⁸ "Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Blood of Christ," in E. Theodore Bachman and Helmut T. Lehmann (eds.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 35 (Philadelphia, PA: Muhlenberg, 1960), p. 58. See also how this is further developed in the LWF working paper, "Engaging Economic Globalization as a Communion" (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2001).

⁹ Heinrich Holze (ed.), *The Church as Communion, LWF Documentation 42* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1997), p. 20.