



LWF Office of General Secretary – Ecumenical Relations Update

March 8, 2021

Despite the current situation with the on-going pandemic, ecumenical work forges ahead. There are a few interruptions here or there and some reassessment but on the whole most projects continue to develop.

This brief summary will look at current activities as well as provide a brief reflection.

One of the top priorities, as stated in *The Lutheran World Federation's Commitments on the Ecumenical Way to Ecclesial Communion*,ⁱ is reception and implementation of consensus reached in the dialogues. Implementation is a slightly more difficult to realize given the many restrictions caused by the pandemic but it nonetheless continues to shape our work.

Reception

ALICUM (Anglican Lutheran International Commission for Unity and Mission)

- Goal: Bring together different pairings of Lutheran and Anglican bishops from the same locality in order to find ways of strengthening cooperation and communion-building.
- First Meeting of Steering Committee last December
- Regions were discussed and general direction was given (Brazil, Zimbabwe or Namibia, Tanzania, Porvoo, a country in SE Asia, Australia, Canada, USA)
- Exploring the possibility of another Zoom meeting of the Steering Committee to discuss regions and pairings this spring and possibly an in-person meeting in the summer but that is very tentative.

JDDJ Consultation

- The five ecumenical officers (Lutheran, Catholic, Methodist, Anglican, and Reformed) continue to meet regularly on Zoom.
- First step has been realized: complete translations and online publication in 4 (and now 5 languages) of the JDDJ and the accompanying documents, in particular the Notre Dame Consultation Statement. A print version of the texts will be available

soon. This work was accomplished under LWF editorship led by Pauline Mumia and myself.

- Second step: work on liturgical materials and a Study Guide. Significant steps forward were taken at the beginning of March in a meeting with the General Secretaries in which we discussed the outline and content of the Study Guide. The conversation was lively and productive. There is very positive energy in the group and for the work.
- Timeline for the Study Guide is next year January. The Study Guide is to be more catechetical in nature, helping congregations engage the documents and especially asking: what does “justification” really mean today? What is gospel in our context? What does it mean to be in dialogue, to come together, and proclaim and serve together?
- I’m particularly excited about this work because it seeks the implementation of one of the most significant documents of the ecumenical dialogues and one of the most significant processes of “coming together” as the conversation has moved from 2 partners to now 5 communions.
- A global editorial team is being created. It will consist of the 5 ecumenical officers plus 5 others from around the globe.

Trilateral Report

- The Lutheran-Mennonite-Roman Catholic trilateral dialogue concluded in 2017 but it was only 6 months ago that the Report was finally published. This was because the position I now hold was vacant for some time.
- The Report has enormous potential, I believe, for engagement and implementation. It concludes with a series of challenges to the three communions, challenges we all need to actively take up.
- The Mennonites in particular have expressed their commitment to this work and I hope we can find ways to do the same. One possibility might be to establish a small working group that would focus on the challenges that Lutherans have accepted in this document.

Dialogues

Orthodox

- I thought the Lutheran-Orthodox would wait until we could meet in-person but a great desire was expressed by the Orthodox side to convene an intermediary meeting online. This will take place via Zoom on March 11.
- The theme of the conversation is “Blessing as a work of the Holy Spirit in these extraordinary times.”
- It seems to establish a bridge between the first preparatory meeting in 2019 on the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church and the next in-person meeting (to be determined) on the work of the Holy Spirit in the world.

Pentecostal

- The drafting work for the final document continues via Zoom.
- There is hope for a final in-person meeting in the Fall of this year to conclude the work and perhaps set the stage for another round of conversations.

[Salvation Army]

- This is not at the level of a dialogue but the Salvation Army reached out to us wishing to be more involved in the work of the world communions.
- Martin Junge and I had a wonderful Zoom conversation with the Salvation Army General Brian Peddle and the ecumenical officer Commissioner Elizabeth Matear. We will continue informal conversations in this manner for the moment.

Exploration

Project 2021

- The Study Group exploring the excommunication of Luther also continues to meet though the rhythm of work has been slower.
- We had an important Zoom meeting in January that gave some renewed direction around the theme of implicit reception of Luther within Catholicism and the examination of key condemnations in the Bull of excommunication, focusing particularly on the different theological frameworks involved.
- There is no timeline for this work as it is of significant proportion.
- Goal: produce a Common Word on the excommunication and possibly host a symposium on the historical, theological, and canonical aspects of the excommunication as well as implicit reception.

World Communion of Reformed Churches

- We are in the process of establishing a study group on religious freedom (occasioned by the 500th Anniversary of Luther's treatise "The Freedom of a Christian" and the 450th Anniversary of the Edict of Emden).
- Currently, we are exploring the possibility of a theological study accompanied by a contextual study.
- Religious freedom is a topic of high relevance for both communions where both partners believe that we can make a significant contribution to our communions, their member churches, and to the ecumenical movement.

Reflections

It has been just over one year since I arrived in this position. As I have engaged the work, I have come to see that ecumenical relations is deeply intertwined with a search for ecclesial identity. I spoke about this on a Faith and Order webinar last November and have also written an article on it for *Lutheran Forum* (to be published Spring 2021). The question of Lutheran identity(s) may stem from internal situations but, because Lutheran identity is shaped by its confessional, that is, ecumenical foundation, it is also not surprising that we are seeking more and more to define the nature or character or dynamic of "church." Ecclesiology is a bigger and bigger question.

This search for ecclesial identity is also connected to vulnerability. We are reminded of the second Ecumenical Imperative: "Lutherans and Catholics must let themselves continuously be transformed by the encounter with the other and by the mutual witness

of faith.” (FCTC §241). And we are challenged to ask, what transformation actually means for us as church.

Some have argued that the problem of the ecumenical movement is that cannot define its goal or that it doesn’t have a clear model of unity. I would respond: that is precisely why there is an ecumenical movement. It is to uncover the model, which begins with critical self (ecclesial)-reflection.

For Lutherans, one area of reflection connected to identity is *leiturgia*. Our liturgy shapes who we are. In a time of pandemic, it is particularly the liturgical order that suffers and with it, the heart of our ecclesial identity: proclamation in Word and sacrament. As part of our church’s reflection on this question, in these times, I wrote a short reflection on Holy Communion with some considerations. This short essay, focused on the sacrament and sacramental practice, is simply part of a larger question around ecclesial identity and therefore also about ecumenical relations, witnessing to Jesus Christ alone.

As you know, following the Joint Commemoration of the Reformation and in response to its call, the LWF Council approved a document titled *The Lutheran World Federation’s Commitments on the Ecumenical Way to Ecclesial Communion*. These commitments recognize the global reality and the variety of forms of ecumenism. They call for the renewal of dialogues with a special focus on the challenges of reception, implementation, and pastoral responsibility. The LWF ecumenical commitments, with this focus on pastoral responsibility, highlight yet another priority: the formulation of new articulations and theological constructions for ecumenical dialogue in order to respond to pastoral situations, enhance common service, and achieve common proclamation. Pursuing this direction means, as seen in the list of activities above, creating conversation spaces in the midst of doctrinal issues, including areas of spiritual life, prayer, Bible study, liturgical forms, and also the exploration of thought-spaces beyond uniquely Euro-centric formulated hermeneutics. This particular priority seeks the collaboration and cooperation of member churches and ecumenical partners as implementation and reception further define and shape our on-going work.

With gratitude for all your support.

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ⁱ https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2018/documents/dtpw-ecumenical_commitments_2018_en.pdf