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Overcome Evil with Good

The Role of the Church in Peace and Reconciliation

Introduction

As the year 2022 draws to a close, there are more than 30 ongoing conflicts in the world. They range from territorial disputes to civil wars, with a wide range in between.¹ As a global Lutheran communion, The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) is present in or nearby the sites of conflict: Ethiopia, Israel-Palestine, Myanmar, Nigeria, just to name a few. But now as the Russian aggression that has resulted in a war on Ukraine lingers on, the heightened threat of war spilling over to neighboring countries, a nuclear threat, and the global impact on food security in other nations in the global South creates anxiety in us all.

Conflicts, violence, and war are not just out there distant from us, we can also feel it closer to us—at our doorsteps. Although the influence of geopolitical players is clearly dominant, as a church called to work together for a more just, peaceful, and reconciled world, what is the role of the church in the work for peace and reconciliation?

In Romans chapter 12:17-18, it says:

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Do we live in a world where peace is impossible? Or is there another way? Are we irrelevant and only reduced to actors that merely react to what is changing every day? Or can we be proactive? Will evil have the final say in our lifetime? Or can we live out verse 21 that reminds us:

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

I would like to invite us to keep these truths in mind as we reflect on the world that we live in today.

The ‘modern’ world we live in is changing rapidly

Let us take a step back and reflect on how we live in a *modern* world that is constantly changing. Although war and conflict dominate the media that we consume each day, let us pause to consider the critical social, political, economic, and environmental shifts impacting people in the global context since we have

¹ For more see:

<https://www.visualcapitalist.com/mapped-where-are-the-worlds-ongoing-conflicts-today/?fbclid=IwAR3lgTnHIWLJGblIZLRxwAm-Ax2jTFNKeGmoTxB19H3XR2GnkBMYGfrf21k>.

last gathered in 2017 in Namibia. We hear from member churches about different issues which are specific to their context, but there's also much that is interconnected:

- the rise of religious nationalism and populism;
- the ramifications of violent conflicts;
- the effects of climate change;
- the mass displacement of people;
- growing inequalities;
- the growing contempt for, and violations of, human rights;
- the shrinking of democratic and civic space;
- and the negative impact of social media and the spread of misinformation.

The list seems to grow each day, challenging us to dig deep into the wells of our spiritual, theological, and ethical resources to respond adequately. At different moments we can turn to renewed engagement with the theology of the cross, commitment to good works for the sake of loving our neighbors, and our understanding of the distinct roles of governments and the law as well as our role as churches in holistic mission, which encompasses proclamation, diakonia and advocacy.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which shook the world in 2020, has further revealed the weakness and vulnerability of public health and economic systems globally, and exacerbated existing challenges. The last two years will be remembered for the devastating impact of a global health pandemic on people and communities all over the world. Sadly, with the war in Ukraine lingering on with continuous global implications, we do not seem to have a moment to rest or to even recuperate.

As a communion of 149 member churches in 99 countries² responding to growing needs, we share in the collective experience of anxiety, uncertainty and suffering with our neighbors within the wider society. We are living through a time where the interconnection between the personal and the public is clearly revealed in public health measures, concerns over psycho-social well-being of citizens, dissemination of accurate information in media spaces, and addressing misleading theologies and harmful public rhetoric. This is a time for us to offer theological, ethical, and religious leadership that is regionally relevant and globally connected.

The 'wounded' world we live in is plagued by divisiveness

Indeed, not only are we confronted with changing shifts, but we are also facing forces that constantly divide. These divisions are obstacles to the realization of a world that is just, peaceful, and reconciled. We live in a time when words like 'division,' 'conflict,' 'hate,' and even 'war' dominate our news daily. Even in

² This lecture was delivered on October 17, 2022, and at that time the LWF included 149 member churches in 99 countries. In June 2023 the LWF Council welcomed the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Georgia as a full member, bringing the total number of churches to 150.

places where there might not be physical warfare, the war of words in the public space, often through political rhetoric mixed with religious overtones, causes ordinary citizens much alarm. What is troubling is not just that there are politicians spouting exclusionary speeches; at a deeper level we are concerned with a growing number of common people who vote these politicians into office. Tragically, some voters may claim to be religious, or some might even consider themselves Christians.

In one of the LWF studies *Resisting exclusion* we are reminded that: “In a situation where populist movements misappropriate Christian rhetoric to justify their aspirations, churches cannot remain silent, but need to resist exclusionary strategies.”³ These words are increasingly more relevant as we are confronted with religious voices that justify war and violence, or political voices that instrumentalize religion to divide people, build their own imperial empires, or even more cynically, seek to remain relevant.

Let me highlight three values that need to be strengthened among our members, and would also resonate with friends and neighbors of different religious traditions and life stances.

Inspired by Faith, we need to uplift ‘courage and clarity’ in our understanding, of who we are as human beings.

Although we affirm that all human beings are created in God’s image, it’s a broken image that is far from ideal. This means we must look at our human condition with courage and clarity to confront our sinfulness, while affirming our responsibility to fulfill God’s will.

When the church is indeed called to engage in the public space, both confidently and courageously, we equally address the voices within our own ranks in the same way. Archbishop em. Antje Jackelén, LWF Vice-President for the Nordic Countries, always reminds us about the five Ps: Populism, Polarization, Protectionism, Post-truth, and Patriarchy. She discusses Populism through elaborating on three other Ps, such as how Polarization names the widening gap between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ and is entangled with Protectionism that arises from those who feel they belong to society’s disadvantaged.³ What originally could be a healthy patriotism is now turned into a kind of nationalism that is divisive and hostile to those who are different. The vision of a society, where diversity could have been understood as a strength, now is distorted through not only unverified ‘facts’—but what are really ‘public lies’, hence the phrase Post-truth. Adding “patriarchy” as the fifth component, Jackelén has called on churches to counter the 5Ps with a narrative of hope and participation, including the courage to speak, pray and act.⁴

Being Church in our trying times calls for church leaders who are both confident and courageous, who can stand up against any kind of propaganda that scapegoats foreigners, and even worse, demonizes them without any regard for

³ See <https://lutheranworld.org/news/silence-not-option-against-populism>; Eva Harasta and Simone Sinn (eds.), *Resisting Exclusion: Global Theological Responses to Populism*, Leipzig, 2019, <https://lutheranworld.org/resources/publication-resisting-exclusion-global-theological-responses-populism>.

⁴ The Church in the Public Space, <https://lutheranworld.org/resources/publication-church-public-space-study-document-lutheran-world-federation>.

their humanity. Furthermore, in situations where there is shrinking space for civil society and religious actors, silence is not an option. These themes are highlighted in the LWF Study document, “The Church in the Public Space.” Conflict and war across the world is a pressing challenge that cuts across our respective contexts. Against that we need to emphasize our role as peacemakers who can confront the conditions that hinder our capacity to live peaceably with one another.

In realizing our role in the work for peace and reconciliation, as instruments of peace, we must not claim a superior position in the public discourse, in the sense of having a holy authority. Rather, as people of faith, we recognize that humility is an important virtue in a world that often takes pride in being able to dominate. Genuine humility is expressed not by pious words, but by the courage to look at ourselves in the mirror, confess and repent our wrongdoings, and be ready to repair whatever damage we may have inflicted on others.

In this way, the church seeks to model a self-critical posture while speaking out for hope, justice, and peace. Indeed, we are not called to merely shout and make noise to gain attention, as people of faith who value truth and trust. As leaders of the church, we are called to speak truth that is able to withstand critical scrutiny. Why we can do so is precisely because we recognize that in line with *Semper reformanda*—we recognize that this means that the church is “always in need of being reformed.” A life of constant conversion and renewal means that we must face our own weaknesses and inadequacies rather than blaming the other. The Christian tradition of reformation, which we are part of, is about ‘transformation’ that is not a “drift into the irrational”.⁵ It involves “criticism and self-criticism of the traditions and institutions, but also naturally excludes any blanket condemnation or banning of these institutions from the public space.”⁶ This is not an easy approach to articulate in a world that prefers simplistic solutions.

Inspired by Hope, we need to nurture ‘patience and persistence’ in facing the troubles in our world.

We recognize the complexities of human institutions and the reality of human sinfulness, even in the sincerest proposals for solutions. At the same time, we value every small effort and often less visible, quiet but significant initiatives in the public, but also outside of media attention and the public eye. I would like to highlight that in many contexts, it is hard for Christians to speak out for peace and reconciliation in the public space. As a global communion, we learn from our churches in Myanmar, Zambia, Brazil, and Hong Kong, to name a few.

The Lutheran Churches in Eastern Europe have a distinct gift to share with the wider communion and society. The many years of living under the communist regime and authoritarian governments have taught the churches to live out the Christian faith with resilience and persistence.

⁵ Antje Jackelén: “Responsible Church Leadership in the Face of Polarization, Populism, Protectionism and Post-truth”, *Resisting Exclusion*, p. 33.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Your experience and witness can resonate with Christians who struggle to speak out in the public space, where often ethno-religious nationalist discourses misappropriating religious rhetoric from other faith traditions remains a real challenge. How can the church in these contexts speak out with other religious leaders to ‘resist exclusionary’ policies and politics too? Each region wrestles with its respective context and as a global communion we stand in solidarity with each other. At the same time, we are able to share insights and inspiration to strengthen one another. Such an intercultural engagement demands a self-critical posture even when our shared vision and commitment is about hope, justice, and peace.

Therefore, while we speak out, we do not do so in a self-righteous posture, as if we possess a ‘holier-than-thou’ attitude. Rather, true to the vision of the LWF, we aim to speak out from a position of humility: “we work together for a just, peaceful, and reconciled world” because we are “liberated by God’s grace”—this transformative grace is not only for us, but also for a world that is full of ambiguity and complexity.⁷

During the pandemic, and even now as we learn to live with the various waves of the pandemic, we continue to hear about mental and psychosocial challenges that people are confronting daily—some are further traumatized by conflict and war. As Christians we have witnessed how important the practice of prayer is, and a deep spirituality needed to remain resilient in the wake of so much uncertainty. The adaptation of digital technology for spiritual practices has been one aspect, but additionally, we were also able to connect with fellow believers, and other religious communities, to learn from one another and support one another. Indeed, when we nurture patience and persistence in our religious communities, we are also persevering in the good works we are called to do for our neighbors.

In our interaction with other faith actors and staff in the World Health Organization (WHO) faith network, we have seen at a global level how important religious communities have been in addressing the pastoral needs of people who have lost their loved ones, as well as coping with various impacts due to the pandemic. But patience is also needed, and persistence in dealing with vaccine hesitancy as well as advocating for vaccine equity, so that no one is left behind, particularly in countries which do not have the capacity to get the vaccines they need for the protection of their people.

Now, in the light of the war, we are also ready to pastorally support many who have been traumatized by it. It is encouraging to see how member churches in the Eastern European region have stepped up, not only to provide material support to those in need, but also spiritual care and support that addresses the need of the wounded souls of those fleeing the war and danger. From bomb shelters for Ukrainian schools, to support for refugees to be resilient during these trying times, I want to affirm the good work that you are doing with the support of partners.⁸

⁷ The full vision statement reads: “Liberated by God’s Grace, a communion in Christ, living and working together for a just, peaceful, and reconciled world.”

⁸ For more see: <https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/bomb-shelters-ukrainian-schools>,

Inspired by Love, we share in Solidarity with the wounded and empowerment for the common good.

The question “Who is my neighbor?” is particularly relevant in current times. Jesus’ answer expands the ordinary understanding of the neighbor and calls for overcoming boundaries of ethnicity, race, gender perceptions, and social status; the other person’s need is all that matters. The call to neighborly love is an intrinsic part of the Christian life. A Lutheran Christian, being liberated by God’s grace to love and serve the neighbor, implies declaring one’s solidarity with the disadvantaged in society. Additionally, our contribution to the public space, which is a common good, is guided primarily by assessing the consequences of political decisions for the most disadvantaged in society. Our collective decisions must not be based on the math of the most influential majorities, but by the quest for God’s justice and grace for all. This is one area where the spiritual and moral values of religion intersect with broader social values that inform public policy and practice.

In Nigeria, my own context, we have been encouraged by a small youth project which has recently shown how young people are taking up leadership to explore new ways of promoting peace in extremely difficult conflict situations. This year, in spite of the challenges of the pandemic, an LWF supported youth project reported on how they brought together Farmers and Herdsmen on neutral ground, so that different parties, linked to the conflicts in their communities, were able to express their concerns and discuss the root causes of the clashes amongst them.⁹ Although the whole project was initiated by Lutheran youth, they were able to bring on board Muslim partners to work together for peace and reconciliation. These are small, but significant steps that we believe will have a long-term impact.

The concern for our neighbor is one that resonates with different religions and other ethical non-religious convictions. During World Refugee Day in June 2022, the LWF collaborated with our Jewish and Muslim partners in an international conference in Geneva, entitled “Welcoming the Stranger, Living as Neighbors, Shaping the Future”. It was inspiring to see more than 80 participants of different religious backgrounds from 37 countries, sharing insights and lessons on how faith actors, inspired by spiritual and moral values, are helping refugees, internally displaced persons, and people on the move due to conflict in their country of origin.¹⁰

Closing Remarks

Indeed, we have a role in peace and reconciliation at various levels, and in different contexts. We also have a role in offering inspiration and support that mobilizes our members to reach out beyond ourselves for the common good.

<https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/six-months-continued-support-needed-ukraine> & <https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/ukraine-you-have-stand-and-move>.

⁹ Cf. Report from LCCN Youth Peace Project 2022: Implementing the Youth, Peace and Security Agenda at Country-level A Guide for Public Officials:

<https://youth4peace.info/system/files/2022-02/YPS-guide-for-public-officials-1.pdf>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

We cannot remain on the sidelines, retreat into our religious ghettos, or refrain from extending hospitality and solidarity to those who are different from us. All these initiatives feed into creating the conditions so that our work for peace can flourish despite the challenges we face.

In times when we are confronted with so much conflict, especially in the political and democratic space, there will be many forces that aim to inflict harm on society for their own self-interests and self-gain. I think more religious leaders and faith actors across religions need to speak up. My hope is that we can draw on the theological framework and practices from study documents, such as *the Church in the Public Space*, afresh with more relevance, and even with additional insights and foresights that will help energize such a movement.

As Christians, and Lutherans in particular, we offer the language and inspiration from our Holy Scriptures, and theological understandings of the love of God and our neighbor, to not only cope ourselves but also reach out to others. We advocate for values of faith, hope, and love, that are not only relevant for our own communities, but also the wider society. In short, religion matters in society—but it's a religion that is not inward looking but reaching outward, beyond us. Then we can overcome the many crises in the world, *stronger together*, for a more just, peaceful, and reconciled world.

As the scripture rightly reminds us:

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:21)