



THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

LUTHERISCHER WELTBUND – FEDERACIÓN LUTERANA MUNDIAL – FÉDÉRATION LUTHÉRIENNE MONDIALE

Office of the General Secretary

Greeting to the Institute for Ecumenical Research, Strasbourg, on the Occasion of its 40th Anniversary

Dear friends,

It is with great joy that I convey to you in the church of St Pierre-le-Jeune in Strasbourg on 3 April 2005 my sincere greetings as you celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg. I greet especially the Church of the Augsburg Confession of Alsace and Lorraine, hosting this event, the staff of the Institute and the Board of the Lutheran Foundation for Interconfessional Research as its governing body.

On such an historical occasion it is natural to look back and also to look ahead. It is a striking fact that if we look back to the LWF Fourth Assembly in Helsinki in 1963, where the Foundation was decided upon, which enabled the establishment of the Strasbourg Institute, we find perspectives developed there which point clearly to the future.

In the Report to the Helsinki Assembly of the *Special Commission on Inter-Confessional Research* reference is made to the resolution of an international conference of 25 Lutheran theologians which was held in Hoisbüttel, Germany, 13-16 October 1958. This resolution points the way to the developments that would follow. It states:

We are agreed that the Lutheran churches have a specific responsibility in regard to the relationship of the confessions to one another, and that they must not evade this responsibility. We are convinced that this responsibility extends to Roman Catholicism. The most important contribution of the Lutheran churches to the clarification of ecumenical issues lies in theological research into the truth of the Gospel. We consider it right that the Lutheran World Federation should take appropriate steps to take account of this common responsibility of Lutheran Christianity.

We take note here of the strong language that is used. No less than four times does this short resolution speak of the “responsibility” of the Lutheran churches and, hence, of the Lutheran World Federation, to be engaged in ecumenism and ecumenical research. The Report to the Helsinki Assembly of the *Special Commission on Interconfessional Research* continues by focusing on the full breadth of the ecumenical task of the LWF. It points to the fact that many member churches are already engaged in various forms of ecumenical relations, and continues:

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But the primary task, and one which at the same time requires greater staying power, is inter-confessional theological research; this is something with which the Lutheran World Federation by its very nature should concern itself. By using the term “inter-confessional” we would indicate the breadth of the task which is set: even if the encounter with Rome is the first to be dealt with, nevertheless the conversations with the other Christian churches, with the Orthodox, the Anglicans, and the churches in the Reformed tradition, must not be lost sight of. In detail the tasks can be described, in our opinion, as follows:

Theological research, both historical and systematic, in areas where the Christian churches are divided on matters of doctrine and church order; the holding of theological seminars and conferences; contacts and conversations with theologians from other churches, in order to obtain first-hand knowledge of their doctrinal convictions and theological methods, and in order to communicate the understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and His Church as rediscovered in the Lutheran Reformation. (P. 11-12)

We might have formulated the task of ecumenical dialogue differently today, 42 years later. But there are two foci in what is stated here that have been at the core of the life and work of the Institute and deserve to be retained for Lutheran ecumenism both today and in the time to come: the focus on the gospel of Jesus Christ and the focus on theological method.

These foci correspond to a fundamental characteristic of the Augsburg Confession, especially in the sequence of its Articles 4 to 8, which shows how the gospel of God’s justifying grace in Christ, communicated in word and sacraments, as constitutive for the church as well as for the unity of the church. At a crucial stage of the history of the church the Augsburg Confession showed how the *nature* of the church and the *unity* of the church are inseparable aspects of the community of those who believe in, and share in, God’s justifying grace.

It is significant that the first major report of the international Lutheran – Roman Catholic dialogue, with which the Strasbourg Institute was deeply involved and was published in 1971, bears the title “The Gospel and the Church”. And it is appropriate today, on its 40th anniversary, to commend the Strasbourg Institute for having consistently upheld through these years the gospel of God’s justifying grace as the core of the Christian faith, with its many consequences for the understanding of the church and its unity.

Since the relationship between the gospel and the church, has to do with the living relationship between God and the God-created world, the task of ecumenism is also, inherently, a living process where the best of theological reflection must be involved with regard to the methods by which Christian unity can most appropriately be furthered in different relationships. The Strasbourg Institute must be commended today in particular for the major contributions it has provided to the ecumenical movement through methodological reflection.

I am grateful and proud to know that Lutheran churches are involved in the vast majority of all *national and regional* agreements of church communion that have been reached around the world. The ecumenical movement represents a many-faceted and complex

network within the church universal. This is why the communion agreements that have been reached are quite different one from each other. They are contextual according to the specificities of the partnerships in question and the given conditions in the different countries and regions. By careful efforts the Lutheran churches within the LWF have been able to maintain their integrity and credibility in the midst of the complexity of their ecumenical relationships.

Substantial theological efforts are of highest importance also in the *international* dialogues with different global partners, even if these, for obvious reasons, are not able at the present time to achieve global agreements of church communion. The LWF is highly appreciative to the Institute for having provided theological assistance to all the international dialogues involving the LWF since the mid 1960s.

The groundwork contributed by the Strasbourg was of decisive importance in the process which led to the signing in 1999 of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* between the LWF and the Roman Catholic Church. This Declaration is the first doctrinal agreement officially affirmed at global level by the two signing partners. It has a unique ecumenical value, through its clear focus on the gospel as the message of justification and through its specific method of a differentiated consensus, which may possibly provide new openings in the time to come, in the relationship between Lutherans and Roman Catholics and also in other ecumenical relations where significant differences remain.

As noted earlier, the Lutheran Foundation for Interconfessional Research was called to carry out “theological research, both historical and systematic, in areas where the Christian churches are divided on matters of doctrine and church order.” The work of the Institute has helped to maintain in the LWF the strong conviction that only by facing – directly and openly – the areas where churches are divided, and working through them however difficult, can true and lasting Christian unity be built, step by step.

Over the years the LWF has developed more and more as a global Communion of Churches, with many partners in different areas of work. Today, the Federation is undergoing a process of self-examination in light of shifting resources and significant changes in the configuration among the partners. This process of self-examination is more than simply looking at the structures of the Lutheran family. It takes place within the context of the whole ecumenical movement. And as a Communion of Churches we must also consider together at the present time the ecclesiological aspects of who we are, and how we shall develop in the time to come. Let me again refer back to the Fourth Assembly in Helsinki. Professor Ernst Kinder of Germany gave the *Oral Report of the Commission on Theology*. What he states here is just as true today as it was in 1963:

By reason of its continuing development the Lutheran World Federation is being compelled to face increasingly seriously the fundamental question concerning the intrinsic right by which the Lutheran churches of the world are joined together today in a federation for the purpose of common action, and that obligations arise for them in consequence. This means that the more the Federation develops its activity in various directions, the more imperatively the demand for common theological deliberation makes itself felt within the Federation.

[...]

*It is of extreme importance that this deliberation which is constantly imposed by the very nature of the case should be undertaken **jointly** by the Lutheran churches with their varying forms of organization and their different situations. Through common theological endeavor and struggle in relation to the true center of the Church's life, [...] the individual Lutheran churches with their special situations and tasks will be helped to a better and more profound self-understanding, so that they recognize even more clearly what the "duty" of their confession of the gospel really means for their existence, their witness, their life, their action and their ecumenical responsibility, and what this confession, which is common to the Lutheran churches despite all their differences in outward form, means for their relationship to one another. (Proceedings of the Fourth Assembly, p. 149 and 151)*

It is my joy today to assure the Institute for Ecumenical Research, its Board and you who are gathered for the anniversary celebration, of the continued strong commitment of the Federation to the scholarly work that the Institute represents in our Communion. May the Triune God bless and guide this work at the present stage of our common history, and in the years that lie ahead.

Geneva at Easter 2005.

Rev. Dr. Ishmael Noko

General Secretary