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THE
LUTHERAN
WORLD
FEDERATION

Called to be Disciples in Today's World

Address to the Lutheran World Federation Council
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- 1) We are called to be disciples in today's world. This is a simple statement. But behind it lay many interpretations and ideas that are complex and sometimes contradictory. What does it mean to be a disciple? What can it then mean to go out and "make disciples," as Jesus directs us in Matthew's gospel (28:19)? What did it mean in Jesus' own time? What do we, as Lutherans, have to say about discipleship?
- 2) While much modern writing about discipleship tends toward a legalistic distinction between "regular" or "nominal" Christians and "disciples," I will be emphasizing a discipleship of equals. We are equal before God and equally called by God to serve the world. Our discipleship is grounded in God's call. Because God has approached us, we are free to approach others. We live in a world of profound complexity and speak within many different contexts. What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus in Argentina, in Palestine, in Canada, in Myanmar, or in Namibia and other parts of the world? How is our discipleship challenged when our churches are wealthy or when we experience persecution? I am convinced that discipleship is a concept that we need to reclaim as we seek to accompany one another as we participate in God's redeeming and reconciling mission.
- 3) It has been some time since discipleship was a topic of conversation within our global communion. The last time sustained conversation about discipleship arose was in the early 1970s. During the Evian Assembly in 1970, theological ethicist Heinz Eduard Tödt offered thoughts on "Creative Discipleship in the Contemporary World Crisis." Tödt provided excellent reflections on "the productive significance of the doctrine of the Two Kingdoms," and concluded with a passionate appeal to preserve the dignity of

all human beings.¹ The LWF sent Tödt's address to all member churches for study.

- 4) One reaction came in 1973 in a thematic address by Gottfried Voigt to the Executive Committee meeting in Eisenach, German Democratic Republic (DDR). With explicit reference to Tödt's address on discipleship, Voigt insisted that "this term should again be honored." I find his closing sentences quite compelling and quite relevant four decades later: "We try so often to commend ourselves to the world by means of an apologetic of accommodation that actually opposes the Cross. Is this Christ-discipleship? Perhaps people—to whom we have long since become boring as church—will once again become attentive to Christ, if they notice that we are actually following him."²
- 5) In this address, I will offer some thoughts on how we can understand the call to discipleship biblically and theologically while attempting to link those thoughts to the work of our Global Communion. I am convinced that discipleship is a concept that we need to reclaim. The problem, however, is that discipleship has been filled with different kinds of meanings that may or may not be helpful to us today. So, to begin the conversation, I will return to some of the basics of our faith and of our Lutheran sense of how we can best be followers of Jesus in a complex and rapidly changing world.

1. Biblical Foundations

- 6) The word "disciple" (Gk, *mathētēs*) occurs 261 times in the Gospels and in Acts. Although the concept is not used by the Apostle Paul, it was very important to the Gospel writers. In ancient Greek literature, the word was used primarily to describe people connected deeply with an authority who possessed superior knowledge. A disciple could be an apprentice learning a trade or a philosopher seeking wisdom. The word implies something more

¹ Heinz E. Tödt, «Creative Discipleship in the Contemporary World Crises,» Address at the Evian Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, trans. Eugene Skibbe (July 1970): 31–42.

² Gottfried Voigt, "Faith and Discipleship," Thematic Presentation for the LWF Executive Committee, 30 July–4 August, 1973 (Eisenach, Deutsche Demokratische Republik).

than a pupil, meaning what the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* describes as a “materially grounded fellowship.”³

- 7) But Christian discipleship is more than sitting at the feet of a learned master. Hans Weder, in his article on discipleship in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, says, “Discipleship means entering into a lifelong relationship with Jesus.” In this relationship, a disciple is connected to the *person* of Jesus, not just to his *teachings*. Unlike a student sitting at a teacher’s feet, disciples of Jesus Christ depend not just what Jesus taught, but on what he embodies in his person.⁴ Thus, discipleship, which begins not with our own initiative but with the unexpected call of Jesus, is grounded in a lifelong and essential relationship to the living Christ.
- 8) “One becomes a disciple,” Weder reminds us, “not through certain conditions of life but because of the unexpected call of Jesus; the call itself creates what it demands, since discipleship is understood as creation of this call and not as decision of the called.” In discipleship, “Everything depends on remaining in the word of Jesus—on the living relationship to Jesus—whose service in love makes the disciples into friends (John 13; 15). The mark of discipleship is love, which is authoritative in the Church (John 13:34f).”⁵ All of this depends not on our own desire but on the call of God in Christ Jesus.
- 9) Just as Jesus Christ has been sent into the world, so are Christ’s disciples sent out into the world. The community of disciples, Weder says, is “as an extension of Jesus’ own inclination to approach and encounter people.” Jesus establishes relationships with human being so they will in turn be in relationship with others. Now, in this age following the Resurrection and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit in Pentecost, we are sent into the world not as individuals but in the Communion which is the Body of Christ, equipping “the

³ K.H. Regstorf, “μαθητής,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 4, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1967), 417.

⁴ Based on Hans Weder, “Disciple, Discipleship,” trans. Dennis Martin, in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:208.

⁵ Weder, 1992, 2:210.

saints for the work of ministry . . . until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:12–13)

2. Lutheran Foundations

- 10) The concept of discipleship has much to offer our global Lutheran communion as we discern together what it means to be followers of Jesus in today’s world. Unfortunately, however, discipleship has developed into a theological concept Lutherans tend to avoid. Part of this comes from the fact that much modern popular writing about discipleship tends toward a legalistic distinction between “regular” or “nominal” Christians and those special, more dedicated people who are “disciples.” Lutherans have learned hard lessons from movements in our tradition that have divided us along supposedly spiritual lines. If discipleship divides us further, how can it be helpful?
- 11) Today, I want to emphasize a discipleship of equals. If nothing else, a Lutheran interpretation of Scripture reminds us that we are all equal before God. We are equally called by God to serve the world. As we have already heard, our discipleship is grounded in God’s call, not our own motivation or effort. And because God has given God’s self to us, we are free to give ourselves to others and to the world.
- 12) Mark Mattes, a professor at Grand View University in the United States, recently published an article criticizing popular ways of promoting Christian discipleship. His perspective is helpful for us since his critique is grounded in the Lutheran distinction of law and gospel. Specifically, Mattes critiques modes of so-called discipleship that seek to either “fix the church” or “fix the world.”
- 13) In the “fix the church” category, Mattes identifies a tendency to build a “two-tiered hierarchy between those who are the disciples versus those who are mere members, rather than seeing all in the church as disciples.”⁶ Some

⁶ Mark Mattes, “Discipleship in Lutheran Perspective,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 26 (2012), 153.

Christians would argue that there are certain “marks of discipleship” that set some Christians apart from regular believers. Some of those might be prayer, or worship, regular Bible-reading, acts of service, choosing the right spiritual friends, or giving generously to their churches. None of those practices are bad things! The danger is not in doing this or that thing, but in thinking that certain practices set you apart from others, that you are somehow holier than others who do not believe or do exactly what you have decided.

- 14) Rather than listing the things we ought to do in the name of Jesus to be better Christians, discipleship drives us into the world not to do good works for God, but to do good works for our neighbor. As Ephesians 2 reminds us, “by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life” (vv. 8–10). This is the connection between discipleship and justification.

- 15) One of Luther’s criticisms of medieval Catholicism was in its own “two-tiered approach to faith.” As Mattes says, the system held that a person could lead “a distinctive, and superior, ‘religious life’ by following the ‘evangelical counsels’” in contrast to “those ordinary Christians who simply lived their callings in the world.” Instead of emphasizing a distinction between the “religious” and the “secular,” Luther emphasized that true vocation is found in our ordinary, everyday lives. As Mattes summarizes Luther’s teaching, “Imitation of Christ is expressed not by living a unique, ‘holy’ life, antithetical to the world, but that one lives as a ‘little Christ’ right within the world, in the specific vocation which God gives.”⁷ Just as the gospels emphasize that our Christian discipleship is grounded not in our own effort but in the call of Jesus Christ, Luther emphasized that we have been made children of Abraham “not because [we] imitate him, but because [we] have received the promise. . . . It

⁷ Ibid., 145.

is not the imitation that makes sons,” Luther writes, “it is sonship that makes imitators.”⁸ We might add, “it is daughtership that makes imitators.”

- 16) We must reject any attempt to claim that one person or group is a better follower of Jesus than another. Remember that when John told Jesus “Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us,” Jesus’ response was clear: “Do not stop him.” (Luke 9:49–50)
- 17) When you are a church member, you are part of the communion and therefore a disciple. Your faithfulness is not determined by individual actions or decisions, but by the fact that you have been engrafted into the community of believers. When you are in the community, you are a disciple. When you are a disciple, you carry the cross. And when we carry the cross, we carry all of our disagreements, placing them at the foot of the cross. We are carrying the cross together. We are in mission and diakonia together. Although we may have differences, together we are faithful for the Gospel. We are equal in faithfulness, carrying the cross as disciples of our one Savior, Jesus Christ.
- 18) As for the form of discipleship that seeks to “fix the world,” Mattes critiques new forms of the so-called “social gospel” by appealing to a conservative reading “the classical Lutheran insight regarding God’s two kingdoms.” Even if some of us might find his reading of that tradition too restrictive, we can see the importance of, as Mattes says, liberating “Christians from post-millennial fantasy for the genuine care for actual . . . flesh and blood victims.”⁹ We continue to believe that mission is holistic, encompassing proclamation, diakonia, and advocacy.
- 19) Our global communion is heavily involved in relief and development work throughout the world. Each year, millions of dollars flow through our communion office and through many of our member churches to countries and communities devastated by both natural disasters and human conflict.

⁸ Ibid., 146, citing Luther, “Lectures on Galatians” (1519) in LW 27:263.

⁹ Ibid., 155, 156.

We are committed to sustainability to ensure that what we do has lasting effects, not just one-time remedies. As a global communion, we are respected by governments and international agencies alike for the good work we do. The call of discipleship leads us also to emphasize the work being done by our member churches throughout the world in order to strengthen their mission and discipleship, doing the work the church alone can do. To support this work as broadly as possible, I encourage member churches to renew their commitment to DMD in order to strengthen the holistic witness of our global communion.

- 20) In the same way, relief and development work is a faithful expression of our call to discipleship. Luther's own approach to Christian ethics—what we should be doing in the world when our calling has made us imitators of Christ—was focused exclusively on the neighbor. As Luther preached in 1525, “God having no need for our works and benefactions . . . bids us to do for our neighbor what we would do for God. . . . All works of love, then, must be directed to our wretched and needy neighbors. In these lowly ones we are to find and love God, in them we are to serve and honor Him, and only so can we do it. The commandment to love God is wholly merged in that to love our neighbors.”¹⁰ Service to God is indistinguishable from service to the neighbor. Through Christ, we are bound to the neighbor just as we are bound to God—through the *communio* constituted by the love of God in Christ Jesus. Understanding the necessity of these forms of discipleship in our member churches can do nothing but strengthen our communion.
- 21) “In contrast to the prevailing approaches to discipleship, the Lutheran tradition is more ambitious, more radical,” Mattes says. “It speaks to the heart of personal and public sin. The aim is not to reform immoral humanity or immoral society. . . . The Christian gospel declares God's promise to bring forth a new creation in Christ. The Lutheran tradition continues to approach discipleship in

¹⁰ Luther, *Fastenpostille*, 1525 (W.A. 17, 98, 37), quoted in George Wolfgang Forell, *Faith Active in Love: An Investigation of the Principles Underlying Luther's Social Ethics* (New York: The American Press, 1954), 109–110 n.77.

the tradition of Isaiah and Jeremiah's confidence in the power of the Word of God alone to make disciples."¹¹

- 22) Though I do not agree with everything he has written,¹² Mattes provides a helpful way for Lutherans to think about Christian discipleship so we can reclaim it from other, more legalistic forms of Christian devotion. The two problematic impulses of "fixing" either the church or the world trap our churches and our communion in fundamental inequalities.
- 23) If the depth of our discipleship is measured only in terms of our ability to respond materially to the needs of our neighbors around the globe, many churches in our communion are most to be pitied. There is profound economic inequality within this communion, and with great wealth comes great power. But the fact is that "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Cor 15.19). Even as we accompany one another to ensure that the resources within our communion are used most effectively to promote the flourishing of human communities, we must never allow wealth to be sanctified as a sign of discipleship. The same logic must be applied in every context where the so-called "prosperity gospel" challenges the gospel of the cross.
- 24) It makes no sense from a Lutheran perspective to claim that one person is a stronger or better believer than any other. Each of us is *simul iustus et peccator*, no more and no less, each in equal measure before God, through Christ Jesus. The danger in both of these forms of inequality is that our communion could become divided. One constructive response to these divisive challenges is to emphasize a discipleship of equals.
- 25) For the sake of our global communion, we cannot have a two-tiered system of understanding one another. We cannot have a secret pride claiming to follow

¹¹ Mattes, 147.

¹² I am not convinced of Mattes's claim, for instance, that he completely avoids the charge of "Lutheran quietism." My sense is that he is heeding a very conservative notion of Lutheran social action that cares for the neighbor but does not have a sufficient mechanism for challenging the actions of the government. In this approach, Mattes is closer to Lutheranism than to Luther himself. Certainly Bonhoeffer provides a corrective.

Jesus more faithfully than our sisters and brothers in our communion. Even if you feel your interpretation of scripture or our tradition is somehow better, it is not our place to sit in judgment over fellow disciples. We are, in fact, all equal, each bringing our own gifts, our own charism. I call on each one of us in our global communion to commit to seeing each sister and brother as equal in the presence of our Triune God. This equality is the foundation of our common discipleship.

3. The Discipleship of Equals

- 26) We are called to be disciples in today's world. But what does that mean for us and for the world? Paul writes in 2 Corinthians, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us." (17–19) But I ask you today, my sisters and brothers in this Lutheran communion, how can we be these ambassadors for Christ if we are focused primarily on the divisions among us? How can we be ministers of reconciliation among others if we refuse to be reconciled among ourselves?
- 27) One of the first problems in many churches is a basic disagreement about who, exactly, can be a proper disciple of Jesus. Who can be called to ministry? Who can serve with the full authority of the church?
- 28) Lalrinawmi Ralte, a theologian in the Presbyterian Church of Mizoram, India, has shared that her own community's definition of discipleship has become "one of the criteria of rejecting women for ordination, and a barrier to partnership between men and women in the church." By noting that the lists of disciples included men alone, she says, "the church takes the Bible literally to support its stand against women's full participation in the leadership of the church. On the other hand the male hierarchy uses this to further its own

ends. It liberally interprets the Bible to its advantage in maintaining power and position.”

- 29) “Though the twelve are identified as men,” it is clear from Scripture that “the wider circle of disciples are not exclusively males,” Ralte points out. “Though men may tell us that women are not disciples, Jesus did not limit discipleship to Jews or men only. . . . The criteria of discipleship is first of all to be called by Jesus. This call is inclusive, irrespective of sex, race and class.”¹³
- 30) Ralte’s reflections on discipleship are informed by feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza’s concept of the “discipleship of equals.” For Schüssler-Fiorenza, “Qualifying discipleship with the word *equals* does not signify the sameness of the disciples but underscores their equality in diversity. All of them have equal standing, worth, dignity, and access to the gifts [of the Spirit], although they bring different experiences, vocations, and talents to such a discipleship community.”¹⁴
- 31) As Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the chief author of the Indian constitution and a leader in the Dalit community, wrote, “I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved... So long as you do not achieve social liberty, whatever freedom is provided by the law is of no avail to you.” Could we say the same about our churches? I, as the LWF President, ask you to support the gender policy we are bringing to this Council.
- 32) Feminist biblical interpretation helps us understand discipleship from a Lutheran perspective. Professor Elizabeth Struthers Malbon suggests that, in the Gospel of Mark, “women characters” are “especially appropriate” for highlighting what discipleship means “because in the community of the author [Mark], women were in a position to bear most poignantly the message that among followers the ‘first will be last, and the last will be first.’” In Mark 15, in

¹³ Lalrinawmi Ralte, “Discipleship of Equals” [<http://www.womenutc.com/discipleshipogequal1.htm>]. Accessed April 5, 2013.

¹⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, “Discipleship of Equals,” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, ed. Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 70. See also Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesiology of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad, 1993).

the midst of Jesus' crucifixion, women "are most clearly depicted as followers of Jesus. Many women follow even when the twelve disciples flee." While some interpreters, including Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, have argued that these women followers are therefore superior to the men we know as the Twelve Disciples, Malbon takes a different path. "I have argued that fleeing indicates that the disciples are fallible, not that they are nonfollowers," Malbon says. "To be present at all is a mark of followership, but remaining 'at a distance' is a mark of fallibility—for Peter and for the women."¹⁵

- 33) And this, my friends, is the key to a discipleship of equals. Each of us is a fallible follower of our Lord Jesus Christ. Just as we relate to one another as individuals—all of us, as with "equal standing, worth, dignity, and access to the gifts" of the Holy Spirit—so it is between the various member churches of this communion. Together, we are a community of fallible followers of Christ. Together, in our fallibility, we trust that "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor 1.25), and that God's power "is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12.8–10).
- 34) Professor Klaus Wengst has suggested that humility is not simply a virtue to be claimed by a powerful person, but an effect of being humiliated. Humility, therefore, is being humiliated alongside people who are poor and oppressed.¹⁶ Before God—*coram Deo*—"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). All of us as individuals and as churches are equally humiliated in the presence of the Triune God. In this, we are profoundly equal. At the same time, we who have been called by Jesus to be his disciples in the world are profoundly equal in our calling. We are called into communion not by our own efforts but by Jesus. Our accompaniment of one another is grounded in the truth that we are all fallible followers of our savior.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *In the Company of Jesus: Characters in Mark's Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2000), 61, 62.

¹⁶ See Klaus Wengst, *Humility: Solidarity of the Humiliated*, trans. J. Bowden (London: SCM-Canterbury Press, 1988).

4. Implications for Today

- 35) In this address, I have discussed the concept of discipleship in terms of biblical theology, Lutheran dogmatics, and feminist criticism. I have sought to reclaim discipleship as a topic for Lutheran reflection. While these academic perspectives are important, I want to address how we are called to be disciples in today's world. What does the call to discipleship mean for our churches and for our communion?
- 36) As we approach the celebrations of 2017, we have an opportunity to revisit our foundational commitments. We must ask how we can best prepare ourselves to be in the spirit of the reformation, to celebrate the anniversary as disciples. Our commitment to a discipleship of equals extends ecumenically to all Christian families. In our celebration of the Reformation, we reject triumphalism even as we strive to be clear about who we are and what values we claim. The Lutheran recognition that we are *ecclesia semper reformanda*, a church to be always reformed, is a sign of our humility calling us to discipleship.
- 37) I encourage each of you to continue studying "From Conflict to Communion" and promote it as a resource in your home churches. The document does an excellent job summarizing the contemporary challenges of Lutheran-Catholic relations and cooperation. The document's strong historical emphasis is fitting since anniversaries are good times to re-tell stories about ourselves and others. As it says, "Lutherans and Catholics have many reasons to retell their history in new ways. They have been brought closer together through family relations, through their service to the larger world mission, and through their common resistance to tyrannies in many places."
- 38) "From Conflict to Communion" calls Baptism "the basis for unity and common commemoration." It is the foundation of our shared witness. Our human tendency—in the church as well as in political relations—is to emphasize what divides us rather than what brings us together. My sense is that we have provided a great deal of emphasis on the questions of the Holy Eucharist—and these are important questions—but we must also lift up the basic unity we

find in Holy Baptism. It is Baptism that unites us. Through Water and the Word, we are engrafted into the church, the Body of Christ. In Baptism, we are sent out into the world together for the sake of God's holistic mission, in diaconal purpose. Our communion has been studying these questions for quite some time. The Institute for Ecumenical Research developed a study document on baptism in the early 1990s that led to intensive ecumenical conversation on the topic. The fruits of that process were collected in the 1998 publication, *Baptism and the Unity of the Church*. "Baptism is both a foundation of the church as a communion and a mirror of its nature," the study document says. "To be baptized into Christ, to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, is to be baptized into Christ's activity, both his earthly movement through death to resurrection and his present mission in the world through the Spirit. In relation to each, gift again implies call, a call to live out the gift given." This vision transforms ecumenical engagement: "'One Lord, one faith, one baptism' is not something we must achieve, but the gift in which we are called to live and rejoice."¹⁷

- 39) Grounded in Baptism and strengthened through the Eucharist, we are sent out into diaconal service. For centuries, both Catholics and Lutherans have engaged in vital, holistic ministry throughout the world. It is time for us to consider practical ways this work can be done together. The call to service and the call to mission cannot be separated. If we are doing one together, we are no doubt engaging in both together. Ephesians calls us to "bear with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Eph 4.2–6).

Discipleship and Religious Freedom

- 40) Even before this 500th anniversary, we are privileged this year to join with our Orthodox sisters and brothers in commemorating the Edict of Milan. The edict

¹⁷ Michael Root and Risto Saarinen, eds., *Baptism and the Unity of the Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 12, 21. I recommend this book as a solid resource for pastors and theologians exploring baptism within their communities and in ecumenical relationships.

was issued in February 313—1,700 years ago—when Constantine I and Emperor Licinius, meeting in Milan, agreed to establish religious toleration for Christianity throughout the Roman Empire. Reflecting on the Edict of Milan provides Lutherans with opportunities to reflect on the status of religious freedom and our unique approach to the proper relationship between religious and civil authority. Sadly, we do not live in a time when these are merely academic questions. In fact, these questions are existential questions for many member churches. If our commitment to discipleship calls us to explore how we respond to our world today, we must reflect on religious freedom, the realities of persecution, the question of mission, and how we engage the governments of the world.

- 41) Of course, there is no political situation today similar to the realities of the fourth century, when the Edict of Milan was decided. But it is also true that Christians throughout the world relate in very different ways to governments and dominant social structures. This diversity is reflected in our global communion. Some of our member churches live in places with Christian numerical majorities and where Christianity formed the foundations of their surrounding societies. Many other member churches live in contexts where Christians are numerical minorities and where Christianity is either one social worldview among many or a relatively recent arrival to the overall society.
- 42) From the Christian perspective, neither situation is better or worse than the other. In terms of our discipleship, it is equally possible to follow Jesus in any context. But even if we are not in the majority of a particular country or society, we do not seek mere toleration. We seek instead to make contributions to our societies, being recognized as citizens with equal rights and equal responsibilities. We are informed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in December, 1948, which states that “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in

public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance” (Article 18).¹⁸

- 43) In claiming our rights, we also seek to defend the rights of others. We want to make public contributions for the benefit not just of our communities but for the flourishing of human community as a whole. Christian discipleship is a public act. When we take up our cross and follow Jesus, the streets of the city and of our societies form our paths. When Jesus passes by our little boat and says “Follow me and I will make you fish for people,” he is inviting us into a public act. We will not always be able to express our faith safely and easily, but we prize the freedom to do so.
- 44) Many in our global communion know what it means to live as a minority in their home societies. This does not mean that we are persecuted. But it does mean we need to support one another in our struggles. It is not always easy, especially when others have ideas for how you should be treated. When I was invited to the conference in Turkey to discuss the Muslim-Christian perspectives on the Arab Awakening in September 2012, we discussed how minorities could be seen in the Arab and Muslim world. Are the Arab Christian *dhimmi* (a minority protected by *Shariah*)? Are they *millet* (protected autonomous communities)? Should we be seen as specially protected minorities?
- 45) We need to be aware that this conversation is not just about Christians. In Turkey, the Muslims I encountered also mentioned Muslims living in Europe and other parts of the world. They mentioned the law passed in Switzerland regarding building mosques and minarets. If Christians in the global north are advocating strongly for religious freedoms in the global south, what are they doing in their own countries? We cannot ignore the fact that intolerance in Europe only strengthens intolerance in other parts of the world. In Turkey, I insisted that Christians in the Arab world want to be understood as equal citizens with equal rights and equal responsibilities for we are an integral part

¹⁸ For the full text of the Declaration, see <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>.

of the fabric of our societies. Of course, this discussion is important not only for us in the Arab world, but also in Europe and many parts of the world. It is possible that equal citizenship and freedom of religion are the emerging topics for interreligious dialogue.

- 46) At this time in its history, the Lutheran World Federation has the resources to emphasize the concern of religious freedom. It is our duty to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit and to promote the freedom of religion in all contexts. As Lutherans, we support not only the freedom of worship but the freedom of conviction. In this commitment, we work against extreme secularism alongside religious extremism. Without this commitment to moderation, extremists alone will be able to claim the mantle of religion. As we discern together what it means to be disciples in today's world, we must explore what it means to have freedom of religion for ourselves and for others. In all places, our presence in our societies is in itself a witness, a witness to our discipleship.¹⁹ We do not seek to tolerate or to be tolerated. How can we work for freedom of religion for ourselves and for all?
- 47) The first step is to tell the truth about ourselves and our neighbors. As Luther interpreted the Eighth Commandment, "We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light." This was the spirit in which the Council of Religious Institutions in the Holy Land (CRIHL) issued the results of "Victims of our Own Narratives," a study that compared Palestinian and Israeli textbooks. The textbook study analyzed over 700 books in both Israeli and Palestinian schools. The results were clear: 1) There are two conflicting narratives; 2) There isn't sufficient material teaching other religions in both sets of textbooks; 3) Jerusalem is often portrayed as a city belonging to one religion instead of a city shared by two nations and three

¹⁹ For my thoughts on witness and *martyria*, see my book *Witnessing for Peace: In Jerusalem and the World*, ed. Fred Strickert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), especially section two.

religions; and 4) There isn't sufficient material promoting coexistence and acceptance of the other.

- 48) While the CRIHL was impressed by both the scientific nature and the objectiveness of this study, we were sad to observe that all sides are guilty of telling their own narrative and excluding the other. I am convinced that all sides must repent and change the discourse that excludes the other. But the first step is this: to tell the truth, to refuse to bear false witness. Following Jesus means standing up for the rights of all who are marginalized and oppressed, not just Christian friends. I am proud to be part of communion that embraces the theme of religious freedom and call on each of our member churches to renew their commitment to this cause.

Discipleship and Religious Persecution

- 49) In the twenty-first century, disciples in many parts of the world are experiencing persecution. We are seeing a global rise in extremism. Most often, extremism is supporting a political agenda even if it identifies with a religion. Nevertheless, many Christians are being harmed on a daily basis. We notice what is happening in Iran, especially with the imprisonment and reported abuse of Pastor Saeed Abedini. We notice that the law of blasphemy in Pakistan is used by some to take revenge on their enemies or to exploit weak persons and communities. In Nigeria, we grieve for the many deaths caused by continuing clashes between Christians and Muslims. Recently, the World Council of Churches shared news of an ecumenical delegation's solidarity visit to Bangladesh in the midst of growing religious intolerance.²⁰
- 50) Each of these contexts has its own complexities. And we must remember that extremism is not the monopoly of one religion alone. We cannot paint with a broad brush and simplify what we see. How can we express our solidarity with our sisters and brothers standing for their faith in their home countries? How

²⁰ See "Solidarity visit to Bangladesh amidst growing religious intolerance" (WCC News Service), April 15, 2013. Accessed April 15, 2013, at <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/press-centre/news/solidarity-visit-to-bangladesh-amidst-growing-religious-intolerance>

do we give them strength? Or do we say in subtle ways that they are out of sight and out of mind?

- 51) As Christians, we are called to stand with every disciple who is called to stand for their faith. We don't want them to be against their fellow citizens, but to witness for their faith. The first step of solidarity, perhaps, is to listen to their stories. What cross do they understand they are called to bear? What does following Jesus mean to them in their context? How can we, as fallible followers of Jesus, hold steadfast in the face of these profound challenges? The answer is to continue responding to the call of Jesus, being a disciple and a living witness in the midst of the world.
- 52) Here, I must say a word about the situation facing Christians in the Arab world. Freedom of Christian belief and religious expression has long been a concern for Arab Christians. For centuries, we have lived the *martyria* of Christians living in a Muslim-majority context. The events of the past two years have only increased our concerns. Our political hope is found in the commitment to equal citizenship. In Egypt, for instance, Christians doubt whether the present government is committed to either their civil protection or their continued existence. Christians in Syria continue to look at the destruction of their sister communities in Iraq and wonder if they will be able to remain in their country, the place where disciples of Jesus were first called Christians.
- 53) I want to bring to your minds the situation in Egypt. I greet Pope Tawadros II and pledge to him the support of the entire Lutheran World Federation. Pope Tawadros has raised his voice in recent weeks to challenge the present Egyptian government's treatment of Christians in Egypt and to remind Coptic Christians that they need to stay in their country. As in Palestine, Christianity was present in Egypt before Islam. Today, we are learning new ways to live with Muslims, even as we reject the effects of political Islam. The commitment of the Lutheran World Federation is to stand with churches in Egypt, Bangladesh, Iran, Nigeria, Indonesia, Pakistan and others who are suffering as a result of new movements within Muslim communities.

54) In May of this year, many leaders of Middle East churches gathered near Beirut, Lebanon, for a conference on Christian Witness and Presence in the Middle East. The conference moved us toward the renewal of the Middle East Council of Churches. We gathered as the war raged in neighboring Syria and the two Archbishops still held captive by their kidnappers. We heard several times that Christianity is under existential threat in Syria and throughout the region. His Holiness Aram I, Catholicos of the Holy See of Cilicia, told international guests during this conference that "We never accept to be on the margin or periphery of society. Christians are claiming our rights as equal citizens. The Middle East Council of Churches is our common voice." The conversations were difficult, but the need for greater attention to present realities was clear. The Middle East is boiling, and we do not yet know what the outcome will be. I look to you, my sisters and brothers, to accompany my church and my sisters and brothers in the Middle East, all of us fallible followers of Jesus Christ.

55) In January, my friend Archbishop Jean Kawak of the Syriac Orthodox Church distributed a letter about the situation in Syria. He is the director of the Patriarchal Office in Damascus. His letter was written before the kidnapping of the two Orthodox bishops near Aleppo, a shocking act that opened a new page in the history of our region. The letter is wonderful and terrible at the same time. One of his concerns was to tell the world that the struggle in Syria is not between Christians and Muslims, but is harming all Syrians equally. He writes,

We can conclude that this crisis has not made a distinction between the rich and the poor, the old and the young. Furthermore it has not differentiated between a Christian and a Muslim, even though the international community has. Many are the times that we hear countries state that their hearts are with the Christians of Syria. We say to those voices that you do not have to worry about us; our fate is one in the same as all Syrians. The bell has always depended on the minaret, and vice versa. So, our lives are as at risk as everyone else's. We don't worry when the young man, Mohammed, died defending one of our priests, and when Pierre Gabriel Fadi died defending the

great Omayyad mosque in Aleppo. These values have been planted into us Syrians. So we do not accept discrimination. The danger is one. The crisis is one. We cannot separate or differentiate between each other when we live together in the same neighborhood or better yet the same building. Ladies and gentlemen, when a bullet hits a heart of a Muslim, the bleeding is in the heart of the Christian and vice versa.²¹

Discipleship and Mission

- 56) Accompaniment is the core of our relationship with one another, within our global communion. Our discipleship of equals is emphasized and strengthened by Accompaniment, our global communion's theology of mission. But we have many problems today that cause us to not fully accompany one another. It is not difficult to see that, outside of our communion, mission is sometimes about the wallet alone. We must constructively challenge other Christians with our perspective of Accompaniment. Otherwise, our communion could be harmed by forms of ecclesiastical neo-colonialism. This would be a sin against our relationship, against our common standing as equal disciples. These realities must be confronted whenever we encounter them.
- 57) When we focus on a discipleship of equals, we know that our true wealth is in the cross of Jesus Christ, and that our riches are found in the spirituality we share between Asia, Africa, Europe, North America, South America and wherever we are surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses. We do not accompany one another because we are a club of people who agree, but because we practice the discipleship of equals.
- 58) The question of discipleship is connected directly with the nature of mission. The important document, "Mission in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment," published by the LWF in 2004, points out important developments in our communion's understanding of mission. As it says, "From the Sixth Assembly (Dar es Salaam, 1977) onward . . . mission [has

²¹ Archbishop Jean Kawak, "The Message of Forgiveness" (January 2013).

been] understood and practiced in a holistic way as encompassing proclamation, advocacy, and service to the whole person and to all people.”²²

- 59) Given the understanding of Christian discipleship I have outlined in this address, how can we further challenge our understanding of mission? How do we understand the call to preach the gospel and make disciples? Is it our role to convert people or to transform people? While I appreciate that, within our communion, mission has departed from a singular focus on conversion, it is still a necessary topic. How do we comprehend those times when conversion still occurs? In Iran, some churches are refusing to pursue government recognition because the government wants them to sign a non-conversion pledge. How do we defend the right of conversion apart from promises of material gain? Where should we engage in open proclamation and where should we focus more on dialogue for the sake of coexistence? The Church of Norway has partnered with Muslim leaders in their country to produce a joint statement on conversion, agreeing that freedom should be preserved. But this cannot be realistically expected in all contexts. Our challenge, as I see it, is for us to not allow our churches to become battlefields for different ideologies of mission while engaging in a quiet mission for the freedom of conscience.
- 60) Our contextual discipleship calls us back to contextual mission. In my society that is multireligious, I cannot convert one. But are we less Christian than a church that adds thousands? Neither discipleship nor mission are legalistic or moralistic concepts. They must be contextual. Jesus sent seventy disciples into the world. He told them to not force people into relationship with him, to not force discipleship. Shake the dust off of your shoes, he told them. Christ has already proclaimed freedom of religion. Don't force, but proclaim. If they don't want this relationship, it is okay. We seek to transform our world from extremism to moderation. This is an evangelical call.
- 61) Any focus on conversion must be accompanied by a discussion of secularism. As a Semitic person, it is difficult for me to understand someone with no

²² *Mission in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment: An LWF Contribution to the Understanding and Practice of Mission*, ed. Jack Messenger (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2004), 60.

religious identity or commitment. Still, I understand that not all secularism is anti-religion. One of the challenges of discipleship today is working with secularism rather than battling against it. The love of Christ embraces all. Time and again, I have encountered so-called secular people watching to see if Christian disciples are carrying the cross or offering lip-service alone. Our witness is strengthened when the church is fully transparent in its dealings and credible in its word.

- 62) The dynamics of secularity and religiosity present another vital opportunity for exploring the diversities of our communion. While some of us are seeing negative effects of over-emphasizing religious identity, many Lutherans in the Global North are seeing their influence decline. More and more people are disaffiliating from churches. All around them, “secular” leaders—including athletes, businessmen and politicians—are having far greater influence. Our world is shifting, not secularizing. In many parts of the world, religion and religious affiliation have emerged as a central pillar of public identity. When religion becomes a sole source of identity, it can be manipulated into producing deadly consequences. When these dynamics are observed by secularizing societies around the world, extremism can be viewed as the sole public face of faith. Those decontextualized forms of faith harm our collective witness.
- 63) To be contextual, mission must also be holistic. Last year, I was blessed to visit Ethiopia as President of the LWF, with a delegation composed of the Vice President for Africa, Bishop Dr Alex G. Malasusa, Council Member Pamela Akinyi Oyieyo, from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Kenya, and Rev. Dr. Elieshi Mungure, LWF Area Secretary for Africa. In Ethiopia, we saw holistic mission being done throughout the church. I vividly remember a young girl at a rehabilitation house running up to me to give me a flower. I saw how this faithful church was making disciples by responding to the needs of whole people and whole communities. There is no doubt that the EECMY is growing through the praxis of holistic diakonia.

- 64) This year, I was pleased to attend the “International Student Festival in Trondheim,” the world’s largest international student festival. Known as ISFiT, the conference focused this year on the theme of idealism. I was deeply moved to see these young present and future leaders, all between 18 and 25, coming together for an idealistic vision. It became clear to me that they were seeking a deeper spirituality as well. They are looking for meaning and values in their lives. My impression was that they are already disciples looking for a world of idealism, shocked that idealism is not a reality. In the world, they see pragmatism alone, a world in which power alone matters. When we speak with such young leaders, they help the church remember what disciples are called to be. These young leaders are present in each of our contexts. Each of us, as an expression of our discipleship, should recommit to engaging these young leaders in our churches and societies.
- 65) When I was in El Salvador, I worshiped in a church that was fully packed. All of a sudden, I was surprised when Bishop Medardo Gomez asked me, “could you please bless and anoint the disciples in the church”? After the service, they told me this was one of the most dangerous areas in the country. I told him I felt at home there. We were there together in the house of Oscar Romero. Together, we were people living in poverty but liberated in Christ. I call on each of our member churches to accompany and learn from one another so we can all be transformed through holistic mission. I call on DMD to take seriously the notion of contextual discipleship alongside the wonderful gift of contextual, holistic mission. Help us, as member churches, and as fellow disciples, support one another as we seek God’s will.
- 66) We are bound together as equal sisters and brothers in the discipline of Accompaniment. One of the gifts of accompanying one another is our opportunity to strengthen our spirituality by sharing with one another across contexts. We each need to benefit from the richness of discipleship and spirituality present in each of our contexts in every region. Our communion brings the richness of these diverse spiritualities we bring to the table of Reformation celebrations in 2017. As we walk this road together—often in shared challenge but also in shared joy—Christ makes himself known to us in

the breaking of bread. Together, we face a deeply complex world and strengthen each other as we participate in God's mission of reconciliation and love.

Discipleship and the World

- 67) The commitments we are making to promoting religious freedom and holistic mission bring us into necessary contact with governments all over the world. As Lutherans, we heartily embrace this responsibility. But this does not mean we are silent when governments need to be criticized and corrected. Far from it!
- 68) We do not embrace politics, but offer a different sort of political witness. In the midst of great crisis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer detailed both "The Ecclesiastical Responsibility of Government" and "The Political Responsibility of the Church." A government that fails to "protect the righteous," Bonhoeffer says, "undermines the root of the true obedience and, therefore, also its own authority." Regarding the responsibilities of the church, Bonhoeffer points out that "It is part of the Church's office of guardianship that she call sin by its name."²³ That truth-telling is made possible by the freedom of the being justified by faith apart from works of the law. We tell the truth not from our own intellect or ability, but because the spirit has given us words (Luke 12:12; 21:15). Our contextual discipleship is also prophetic.
- 69) We are called to work with every level of civil government to uphold the rights of the needy and give a voice to those who cannot speak. In December 2012, the President, along with General Secretary Junge, participated in the UN High Commissioner for Refugees' Dialogue on Faith and Protection. I suggested the creation of a "Code of Conduct" for faith leaders to commit to receiving all displaced people and to reject fear of the Other. As a result, the LWF was asked to take the lead on this project. The result was a new document: "Welcoming the Stranger: Affirmations for Faith Leaders." I hope that these Affirmations will enjoy broad support around the world among faith

²³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. Neville Horton Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 343, 345.

leaders at local, national, and international level, and that they will have the practical effect of fostering support for refugees and other displaced people in the faith leaders' communities. This is an expression of our discipleship, our commitment to holistic mission, and our responsibility for telling truth to all authorities.

- 70) In our work with governments, we take our gospel-centered values with us to the table. Each of the commitments laid out here and in the Communion Office workplan—freedom of religion, standing with persecuted people, promoting gender equality, responding effectively to disasters and human crises, and so much more—are what we say to governments around the world. Our message does not change. Our values emanate from our call to discipleship.
- 71) Even though we know we are fallible followers of our crucified Lord, we speak with boldness. As we embrace one another as sisters and brothers, we know that we are equal before God. It is our common calling to welcome others into that equality and its gift of humility. We know that God's foolishness in entrusting this message to us is wiser than any human wisdom. We are not triumphalist or moralistic in our claims. But we are deeply confident in our message and in God's mission.
- 72) Bishop Samuel Kibira, in his opening address as LWF President during the Budapest Assembly in 1984, shared with us that "the cross can never be avoided if we are to be able to give hope to the world in a wider sense." Speaking in a context characterized by the struggle between Communism and Capitalism and their effects on Christian witness, President Kibira asked his fellow Lutherans to not "hide that we who have come here today represent very different social systems, systems by which we have been marked to varying degrees." All of us are tempted to conform. "Still I plead," he said: "Let us not accuse one another! Let us instead give each other courage by a common stand to challenge the societies in which we have to live!"

- 73) My sisters and brothers in this global communion, following Jesus Christ is not an easy path. It is a life linked intimately to the person of Jesus Christ, a life leading to the cross. Disciples of Christ do not make their own separate club, but are sent into the world by the one who chose to come into the world.
- 74) As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in the midst of great crisis, “What is to be said about the content of discipleship? Follow me, walk behind me! That is all. Going after him is something without specific content. It is truly not a program for one’s life which would be sensible to implement. It is neither a goal nor an ideal to be sought.” Discipleship, he says, “is nothing other than being bound to Jesus Christ alone. This means completely breaking through anything preprogrammed, idealistic, or legalistic. No further content is possible because Jesus is the only content. There is no other content besides Jesus. He himself is it.”²⁴
- 75) In this poverty, in this world of following Jesus where there is nothing but Jesus, we have the greatest riches. As we reflect on what it means to be a Christian disciple in today’s world, it is good to revisit the basics of our faith. It is good to remind ourselves that we are here simply because of the call of Jesus Christ. We are bound to one another in this communion for the sake of Jesus alone.
- 76) In this brightly burning center of our faith—the confidence that we are called by Jesus—we find our calling and our purpose, as individuals, as churches, as a communion. We are thus called into a holistic response to the world, receiving the gifts and addressing the needs of this world God loves. We take on the challenges sustainable development and the preservation of human rights—including gender justice and religious freedom—while promoting interfaith friendship and moderation in the face of extremism not because we are confident in ourselves alone, but because we follow a God who seeks justice. We are sure of our equality before God and even more confident in

²⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 4, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 58, 58–9.

God's saving and reconciling grace. This is the source of our joy and the foundation of our discipleship.

- 77) I pray that our gracious God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—will strengthen our communion and our member churches for discipleship and mission at home and around our fragmented world. Amen.