



Greeting from the Lutheran World Federation

Brought to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly

by the Rev. Dr. Ishmael Noko, General Secretary

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Bishop Hanson, distinguished delegates and participants, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends, I greet you on behalf of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), of which you are a part. I greet you from the staff in Geneva, but also the staff from the various field programs that are in 35 countries around the world.

I stand before you also to bring a very special greeting. A month ago, I was in Kazakhstan visiting our member church. And that church has a history, I believe most of you know, that cannot be described in words, but only in tears. They knew I was going to be coming here. And I asked them, what should I say?

They gave me the same message I gave you three years ago. They said, "Tell them we survived." The ELCA has a special relationship with that church through your Southern Ohio Synod. I have met Bp. Holloway, and I traveled three years ago in that land. And they want you to know they uphold you in their prayers.

I want to thank you also for the many statements that you have made in relation to your work and the support that you have given to the Lutheran World Federation: malaria, HIV and AIDS, the work of refugees, what Ralie [Deffenbaugh Jr.] was talking about here, and the hunger program that has also touched the lives of my people in Zimbabwe.

I want to thank you also for your own sons and daughters who are working in the LWF in Geneva. One of them is with me here, Kathryn Johnson. She is the assistant general secretary responsible for ecumenical affairs.

With that, let me say to you also that on Thursday afternoon I arrived in Minneapolis with anticipation. I was mindful of the fact that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's Churchwide Assembly was in session. Yet I could not help but recall that exactly 52 years ago this month, during almost the same dates—it was August 15–25, 1957—Lutherans gathered from five continents in Minneapolis for the third Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation. The Minneapolis Auditorium was the place of daily worship and where assembly business was conducted. The theme around which the Assembly was organized, and upon which the delegates reflected together, was "Christ frees and unites." Christ frees and unites.

It was a theme that spoke directly to the global situation of 52 years ago. All the delegates examined that theme from the perspective of their own experiences, whether it was post-war experience or those that came from the southern hemisphere and the colonial experience.

Among the delegates, one of the most conspicuous participants was Bishop Ordass from the Lutheran Church in

Hungary. He had been imprisoned for his faith. And for some strange reason, he was released by authorities to attend the Assembly in Minneapolis, with the understanding that upon his return, he was to go back to his jail cell. The organizers of the Assembly had requested him to be the preacher for the Sunday that fell within the period of the Assembly. Ordass is said to have preached for those who were present a moving sermon on the theme, "Christ frees and unites."

The response of the Assembly to that proclamation was not in words, it was in tears, for the whole hope he proclaimed was the hope in Jesus Christ in the midst of turmoil and consequences of the Second World War. Those tears of the participants that were shed at that time remind us today of the tears that washed the feet of Jesus Christ. Today you are gathered in the same place to share the same faith and hope—yes, that faith and hope that shines precisely in the midst of doubts, vulnerabilities, hesitations, and all kinds of fear. Fifty-two years ago, the relation between and among the Lutheran churches was marked by suspicion. We were not even able to share the Lord's Table with easiness.

Yet, it was in the midst of all those doubts, suspicion, and fears among them that the Lutherans rediscovered anew what unity means. That true unity is a gift. It is a gift rooted in the proclamation of the Gospel and the celebration of the sacraments. This gift is God's own work. And our hands are to serve that unity. They understood that we, therefore, cannot use our hands to pull apart God's costly work.

In light of that rediscovery, our forebears in faith decided to do the most sensible thing to do under those circumstances, and that is to stay together. They did not forsake one another. They did not anathematize each other. They understood that the Church is the body of Christ, a creature of the Gospel—and, therefore, not ours to dismember. They have therefore left behind for us, from this city of Minneapolis, a legacy for us to stay together. Over the years, this yearning for unity has transformed the life of the Lutheran World Federation, moving it from a federation of churches to a communion of churches.

This growth in communion has not been a steady one. It was marked by difficulties, struggles, detours, and delays, and also with joy. And it does not mean uniformity among the churches. We embrace, on many issues, both theological and ethical, a wide range of teaching and practices. But to be united in the Gospel and united in the table of the Lord has allowed us to grow also in our relationship of neutrality and accountability, of respect for one

another. This yearning for unity has made it possible for the Lutheran World Federation to speak and act on behalf of the majority of world Lutherans in the areas of international *diakonia* and advocacy. It has urged us toward deeper relationships with other Christians, including the landmark ecumenical accomplishment of the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification," the tenth anniversary of which we will celebrate this very year—together with the Methodists this time.

It is my hope that in our own LWF Assembly next year in Stuttgart, Germany, we shall take yet another crucial step in relation to our own tradition. We will ask forgiveness for the legacy of a violent persecution against the Anabaptist Christians that goes back to the 16th century. To make such a self-critical move and to admit that we did something wrong would be another mark of maturity as a communion of churches.

This growth in communion has not been a perfect process. It is certainly not finished yet. But it has been the joy of my long experience and work in the LWF to witness the steps that have been taken so far. We cannot choose the challenges which are presented to faithful Christian witness in our own lifetimes. They come to us, so to speak, without our prayer. But in the Lutheran World Federation, we look to the future with hope that we will continue to grow in communion with one another and in unity with the whole Church of Jesus Christ.

I believe that the whole Christian Church will be served well if Lutherans can provide an example of living together in love, speaking truth, confessing the faith, and sharing one another's joys, challenges, and conflicts. We are making an effort to carry this out in relation to the difficult issue of our times today, the one issue that occupied this Assembly intensively during the last days. The Lutheran World Federation has entered a process in which member churches are invited to consult with one another during the period of five years beginning 2007 on the ethical issues of marriage, family, and sexuality. They are requested to conduct this discussion in an open, decent, and respectful way. Your work at this assembly is one such aspect in the process.

As a guest of this assembly, I have listened and watched very carefully as you have taken this task very seriously. You have not addressed these questions as a stand-alone gathering. You have invited into your midst ecumenical partners and partners from other churches. Some of these ecumenical partners and sister churches have agreed, or some have disagreed, with the direction you are taking. I want to emphasize that in this context, even the expressions of disagreements are signs of the indivisibility of the Church of Jesus Christ.

As you lined up in front of the podium in the red line or the green line, you have spoken with one another from your hearts. You have spoken from your pain and from your struggles. You have spoken with respect for one another and with dignity. I have to say that. This manner of deliberating among yourselves does a great deal of honor to your church. Again and again I've heard you make reference to Paul's letter to the Galatians in which you say that we are to bear one another's burden, for in doing so, we fulfill the law of Christ.

This is a mark of a Christian community, which sharply distinguishes the Church from the ways of this world, in which each person bears their own burdens. But in the Church, we are

not allowed to bear our burdens alone. My presence here is a sign of how much we care for you. It is an embodiment of the prayers for your work from the Church around the world. Your pain is our pain. Your struggles are our struggles. Even when our members express concern and disagreement with what you are doing, that expression of disapproval is a mark that our lives are tied together in ways that we can never explain. Let us continue to pray for one another. For in doing so, we carry the burdens of one another.

You are now beginning to prepare to go back to your respective homes, your respective congregations and synods. Whatever your opinions have been, I know that each one of us here has been changed by what we said and what we did in this windblown assembly in which the Holy Spirit of God has been at work.

As you return again to the communities of faith which sent you here, you will have to work yet more. They will want to hear from you as to what happened in Minneapolis. And you need to speak to them about the assembly in ways that will build up the body of Christ. The history of Lutherans meeting in this city 52 years ago invites you to that role. The Gospel calls you to it. Christ frees and Christ unites. This is your call: to be servants of freedom, to be servants of unity.

Bishop Hanson, allow me to finish with a note that is personal. I want to thank you. For me, this is the last assembly that I stand before you. I have appeared at the assemblies so many times that I am sure you think I am part of the staff of ELCA. I want to thank Bishop Hanson and Ione Hanson for their friendship. And I give thanks for all of you. I have had a wonderful time. I have been well-received. If you hear that Ishmael is complaining that he was never received in the ELCA, please doubt that.

I was impressed today, and I began to think: If I were to go to heaven tonight, and God gave me an audience for six minutes, I might have a chance to gossip about those people called Lutherans in the ELCA. And what shall I say about them? Do you want to know what I would say? Do you really want to know? Well, I will tell you, only you. Don't tell anybody else. I would say, "God, those people love their church. I know it. I have witnessed it so many times when I attended the assemblies or other events. God, those people are very generous. They give and share what little they have with their sisters and brothers beyond the borders of the republic of the United States of America. God, those people are fantastic in volunteerism. They volunteer for everything! God, send the Holy Spirit to keep them together." You stay together! This is what I would gossip to God about.

I want to thank this church for your son, Bishop Hanson, for his leadership in the Federation; for the time he spends because you have provided time to him; for his family and the rest of the staff of the ELCA who crisscross this world in order to maintain relationships between your church and the global community.

As I take leave of you now, I greet you with the words of Ruth when she was addressing her mother-in-law: "Entreat me, Lord, that I should not return. Where you go, I will go, where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, your God shall be my God." Thank you.