

HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY IN THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

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In 1977 in Dar es Salaam, the Sixth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), meeting under the theme “In Christ—A New Community,” declared:

Advocacy for justice is an essential, integral part of the mission of the church. It belongs inherently to the proclamation of the word. Justice under the law of God is a witness to the universal sovereignty of God’s law over all his creation.¹

This statement, made half the LWF’s lifetime ago, might come as something of a surprise to those who continue to harbor preconceptions about “Lutheran quietism” and the interpretation of the “two kingdoms doctrine.” It is true that the recorded history of many Lutheran churches may indicate a low priority for issues of political responsibility and public witness for justice. And yet already in 1957, Bishop Hanns Lilje²—himself having been a vocal opponent of National Socialism in Germany at a time when the silence of German Lutheran churches was inspired by a combination of “[f]ear plus the two kingdoms doctrine”³—highlighted this risk in the life of the LWF.

It would be an extremely questionable indication of the theological integrity and strength of the LWF if it were to fail to recognize the theological relevance of these questions of international politics. This would mean that the Lutheran church in the world would be cutting itself off, in one of the most important areas, from the translation of its faith into action.⁴

It is not the purpose of this article to examine in detail the biblical and theological grounds for public witness for justice, which territory has been, and continues to be, explored by many more appropriately qualified authors. But a review of the history of the LWF’s approach to and engagement in public witness and advocacy for justice and human rights demonstrates strikingly the extent to which this commitment has been theologically-driven. And perhaps after all this is a distinctively Lutheran characteristic.

The sort of theologically-inspired critique offered by Bishop Lilje was certainly a significant factor in the self-realization of the LWF as an instrument of churches’ public

witness for justice. Theological reflection—along with the pressures of current events and circumstances—has also driven the LWF’s specific engagement with issues of human rights, which Bishop Lilje had particularly promoted. The Fifth Assembly in 1970 in Evian, France (originally planned for Porto Alegre, Brazil) gave a new prominence to human rights in the life of the LWF. Reflecting on the human rights violations under the military regime in Brazil (which had prompted the change of venue), the Assembly noted that Brazil was not the only locus of concern.

Our concern is far more broad, reaching into an almost universal crisis symbolized by increasing violation of human rights. Brazil is simply a demonstration of a circumstance which exists in many other countries. The concern of this Assembly is directed to the deprivation of God-given human rights wherever, whenever, and for whatever reason it may occur.⁵

This concern gave birth to the human rights program of the LWF Commission on Studies. Characteristically, this program focused on reflection on “Theological Perspectives on Human Rights,” leading to a 1976 consultation in Geneva and a publication under this title which was presented to the LWF’s Sixth Assembly in Dar es Salaam in 1977. Correctly, the LWF study process did not seek to appropriate human rights as “church property” or to claim an exclusive Christian heritage for human rights. It focused instead on advocacy for the implementation of human rights as part of Christian responsibility for the neighbor, for human dignity, and for the world. It also confronted what has long been the ideological faultline within human rights—the alleged division between individual and social rights—insisting that human rights be understood holistically, that individual and social rights not be held in contradiction, and that freedom and justice belong together:

[O]ne group of rights is frequently played off against another and sometimes directly absolutized in different societies. This is offensive to the meaning of human rights. They refer to an indivisible whole, to something which is for the benefit of all human beings,

as human beings, independently of all empirical circumstances and conditions. Whoever is concerned for man must struggle for the realization of all aspects of human rights.⁶

Exploring further the holistic understanding of human rights (and in the process addressing many questions that remain the subject of lively debate today), the LWF study process emphasized that peace is a precondition for any human rights, and recognized the relationship between human rights and the environment by noting that “full realization of human rights can only happen in a world... in which an equilibrium of life is maintained.”⁷

The results of this study process presented to the Sixth Assembly in Dar es Salaam in 1977 led to the adoption of a pivotal resolution on human rights (set against the background of rising international concern about violations in Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Namibia), to the commitment to public advocacy, and to the launching of new programmatic attention to human rights and social and economic injustice.

Beyond that, the study process on human rights—together with the results of a study on “The Identity of the Church and Its Service to the Whole Human Being”—collided with current political circumstances and ongoing discussions on the internal structure and governance of the LWF to produce one of the landmark events in the life of the LWF: the 1977 resolution on “Confessional Integrity” in which apartheid as practiced in Southern Africa was defined as a *status confessionis*, following which the membership of two white Southern African member churches was suspended. With this event, if not before, concern for human rights penetrated the very structure and fabric of the LWF.

Though led by theological reflection, the LWF’s concern for justice and human rights has never been abstract or academic. It has always been informed by the lived experience of

LWF member churches and—importantly—its World Service programs.

Founded in 1947 especially as an instrument for serving human need in Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War, this humanitarian/diaconal calling has remained prominent in the life and work of the LWF ever since. Mounting years of LWF experience in the humanitarian/development field began to demonstrate the longer-term unsustainability of such efforts unless the root causes of social and economic injustice were identi-

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fied and addressed. Along with the deductive study processes examining theological bases for public witness for justice, this inductive process and the insights it produced drew the LWF inevitably and inexorably towards actions and expressions that might broadly be termed “political.” The LWF’s *Guiding Principles for Sustainable Development*⁸ (issued in 2000) gave special prominence to the human rights dimension of sustainable development. And with the formal adoption of a rights-based approach to its World Service work,⁹ human rights have been placed at the very forefront of the LWF’s diaconal response.

In the light of the experience and realities of national and local expressions of the Lutheran communion in contexts that were sometimes and in some places difficult and dangerous,

the LWF has always exercised a degree of circumspection on whether, when, and how to raise overtly human rights and other “political” issues. In 1984 the Studies Department compiled a list of criteria for public pronouncements or official silence in cases of human rights violations.¹⁰ In its public witness for justice, the LWF continues to be cautious about the potential of its statements and advocacy actions to bring down additional suffering and hardship on the heads of its member churches and staff in the situations of which it speaks, and so inadvertently to reduce their capacity for Christian witness and humanitarian action in those contexts.

Nevertheless, advocacy for justice and human rights is now part of the essence of the LWF. Any examination of the LWF’s periodically collected *Public Statements and Letters in the Area of International Affairs and Human Rights*—and of the activities of LWF World Service programs and LWF Mission and Development programs and projects—will demonstrate the diversity of issues that the LWF addresses in its current public witness and the broad range of contexts in which it seeks to do so.

One of the key contexts in which the LWF seeks to exercise its public witness for justice is the United Nations (UN). Founded upon its experience of practical cooperation with the UN for humanitarian relief, the LWF swiftly became engaged in humanitarian policy discussions in UN forums. In 1952, the LWF was awarded official “consultative status” through the UN Economic and Social Council. “Consultative status” for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is a notion that can be traced to Article 71 of the UN Charter, which stipulates: “The Economic and Social Council may make suitable arrangements for consultation with non-governmental organizations which are concerned with matters within its competence.” It should be pointed out that NGOs, including churches and church people, were key participants in the discussions sur-

rounding the formation of the United Nations itself and in the drafting of the UN Charter and other foundational UN texts, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.¹¹ Consultative status is therefore a limited recognition of the fundamental—not peripheral—significance of NGOs for the UN. It permits a relationship between the UN and NGOs that goes beyond that between funder and implementer, but in which NGOs are also engaged in the international discourse on matters of economic and social policy. This recognition entitles the LWF, along with the other NGOs holding such status, to have access to the premises and forums of the UN and to make statements in both written and oral form on shared policy concerns—including everything from human rights to international economic governance. The LWF uses these entitlements often and in many different contexts.

For example, the LWF has regularly attended the sessions of the former UN Commission on Human Rights and its successor body, the Human Rights Council, to lobby and make statements on a range of issues including freedom of religion and belief, the human rights impacts of economic liberalization, Dalit human rights, and repression in Zimbabwe. The LWF has also become closely engaged in the work of the UN human rights treaty bodies (the independent expert committees established to monitor implementation of the provisions of the major UN human rights treaties) and the new Universal Periodic Review mechanism (whereby the human rights record of every UN member state is reviewed by the Human Rights Council every four years), assisting member churches and LWF field programs to make submissions to these bodies on the human rights situations in their own countries. At the World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa, the LWF led a delegation of over two hundred activists campaigning for recognition and action against caste-based discrimination in South Asia and elsewhere. At the time of writing, the LWF

is attending the Durban Review Conference in which the implementation of the commitments made in Durban in 2001 is being reviewed.

The LWF is also working closely with the UN Conference on Trade and Development on the question of “illegitimate debt,” in which context the problem of foreign debt—so long a

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concern of international development and ecumenical communities—is being addressed from an ethical perspective rather than just according to the narrowly economic calculations of “sustainability.” And beyond the UN system itself, the LWF is periodically engaged in policy exchanges with the leadership of the World Trade Organization on the social and economic impacts of international trade liberalization.

The LWF’s commitment to public witness for justice is also demonstrated in its active promotion of and participation in advocacy networks, such as the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance (EAA),¹² which currently campaigns on two focus issues (HIV-AIDS and Food Security), and the International Dalit Solidarity Network,¹³ which addresses itself to the challenge of untouchability and caste-based discrimination around the world. The LWF was a founding member of both of these networks, and has been actively engaged in many others in the past, including the International Campaign to Ban Landmines.¹⁴

At the first Assembly of the EAA, the LWF participated in the formulation of a “Covenant for Action”¹⁵ that declared:

We are impelled by our faith in Christ to lead just lives and to confront unjust structures, practices, and attitudes that deprive human beings of their dignity, and to offer alternative visions based on our understandings of the Holy Scripture... As representatives of churches and related organizations, we believe that by working together and by focusing our efforts, we will be better able to challenge powers and principalities which have failed to create conditions in which all of God’s children can live in peace, justice, and dignity.

This document described “ecumenical advocacy” as “a specific form of witness on political, economic, cultural, and social issues by churches and their members, church-related agencies, and other organizations, which aims to influence policies and practices of governments, international institutions, corporations, and our own communities in order to bring about a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world.”

The potential of cooperation in advocacy for deepening ecumenical relationships is a topic that is coming increasingly to the fore. Apart from the most visible expression of this trend in the establishment of the EAA, this issue has been raised in some of the formal bilateral dialogues in which the LWF is engaged, including especially that with the Anglican Communion. And it is noteworthy that in a November 2005 meeting with Pope Benedict XVI, Mark Hanson, presiding bishop of the ELCA and also president of the LWF, in the context of discussions on the implications of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, remarked:

There should be no doubt that Lutherans and Roman Catholics, together with others, also see issues of ethics and social justice in the light of the doctrine

of justification. As an expression of the gospel itself, the message of justification provides important perspectives for the church's involvement with the poor and those suffering from political oppression and abuse... As Christian churches we are committed to ecumenical cooperation in the area of human rights on all continents in the years to come.¹⁶

The LWF Office for International Affairs and Human Rights (OIAHR), created in the mid-1980s (alongside the Office for Ecumenical Affairs) in order to support the General Secretary in the task of public witness for justice, provides a resource and advocacy vehicle for member churches, World Service programs, and partners concerned with these issues. Though advocacy responsibilities are widely disseminated throughout the LWF secretariat and network, and the range of issues addressed covers a broad sweep of the international social and economic policy agenda, OIAHR plays a special role in terms of engagement with the United Nations human rights mechanisms. A new Human Rights Accountability Project¹⁷ managed by OIAHR on behalf of an ecumenical collectivity provides a new and user-friendly point of access to the major UN mechanisms for promoting accountability to international human rights obligations.

There are very important practical reasons for international church organizations to engage actively with such mechanisms, as remote and obscure as they may appear. Firstly, these mechanisms *are* the main tools available for promoting accountability to international human rights obligations. While they do not have direct enforcement capacity, hardly any international legal mechanism has such enforcement capacity vis-à-vis sovereign states; they rely on the significant “soft power” of their moral content. No state today is entirely impervious to international criticism of its human

rights record. And that very sensitivity to international opprobrium creates opportunities for promoting positive change. In these circumstances, the “moral weight” of churches and other religious entities can greatly enhance the potential for progress.

Secondly, the strength (or weakness) of these mechanisms is directly proportional to the extent of civil society engagement. The mechanisms typically have no research or analysis capacity of their own to cross-check on government reports and are almost

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entirely reliant on civil society sources (including churches and related organizations) for credible independent information about realities on the ground. And the implementation of UN recommendations for the improvement of human rights situations—given the UN human rights system's lack of strict enforcement powers—must generally depend on civil society mobilization of public pressure for action. Therefore, no one can legitimately criticize the weakness of the UN human rights system without criticizing their own failure to use and to act in support of these instruments.

And this is especially true of the mainline historic churches, since there is no other structure in human society that is both horizontally-distributed in almost every remote corner of the world and at the same time vertically-integrated and able to convey the sufferings of the grassroots to the policy forums of the international community. And therein lies the great potential—and responsibility—of the churches for public witness for human dignity.

To be sure, this potential remains very imperfectly realized. The LWF, along with the rest of the global Christian family, continues to struggle to live out the implications of *communio* in ministry and witness. National interests—even nationalist self-identities—continue to impede the churches' witness in this regard. The LWF has a strongly declared identity as a communion of churches. This vision promotes continual reflection on how to respond to any given situation as members of the body of Christ, rather than as a collection of churches defined by the political and geographic boundaries within which they live and minister.

In addition, globalization and the emergence of heightened religious tensions internationally (especially since September 11, 2001), have together greatly sharpened the challenge of neighbor-love. In our “global village” we are more closely interconnected than ever before. And yet we are at the same time seemingly more deeply divided along religious lines than ever before. In the LWF, the lived experience of interreligious cooperation for human development may yet prove to be an important asset in this regard. Though many of the LWF's World Service programs are conducted in majority Christian contexts in cooperation with member churches or other church partners, some—such as those in Cambodia, Nepal, and Mauritania—are not. In those contexts, given that the vast majority of the staff are locally employed, the LWF exhibits the same demographic/

religious profile as the general population. This is an experience from which the LWF—and also those members of other religious traditions who work for the alleviation of human suffering alongside the LWF—may be able to distill important lessons.

To repeat a truism, global problems require global solutions. And climate change, regardless of arguments about its causes, may prove to be the biggest global problem of all. In facing a challenge of this magnitude, churches and all religious communities will necessarily have to play an important role and to find common cause in the effort. No doubt renewed theological discourse on the relationship of humankind to and with creation will accompany and sustain the churches' participation in this cause.

In order to become fully engaged in this and other global issues, attention will have to be given to a residual aloofness in some churches from political engagement, particularly in what may be regarded as a "leftist" agenda. But though the issues may be "political" in the broadest sense,

there cannot be any political partisanship when it comes to the protection of human dignity and God's creation. A new generation of prophets must raise their voices. The church and the world needs to hear them. *LF*

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Notes

1. Statement on "Socio-political Functions and Responsibilities of Lutheran Churches," Proceedings of LWF Sixth Assembly, Dar es Salaam, 1977, p. 176.
2. Member of the LWF Executive Committee from 1947 to 1970 and its president from 1952 to 1957.
3. This is how a synod of the Evangelische Kirche Deutschland characterized the Lutheran position during the Second World War, as quoted in *From Federation to Communion: The History of the Lutheran World Federation*, eds. Jens Holger Schjorring, Prasanna Kumari, and Norman A. Hjelm (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 323.
4. Proceedings of LWF Third Assembly, Minneapolis, 1957, p. 193.
5. Proceedings of LWF Fifth Assembly, Evian, 1970, p. 148.
6. *Theological Perspectives on Human Rights: Report on an LWF Consultation on Human Rights*,

Geneva, June 29–July 3, 1976 (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1977), 12.

7. *Ibid.*, 24.
8. Available at www.lutheranworld.org/What_We_Do/DWS/DWS-Principles.pdf, accessed April 22, 2009.
9. *LWF World Service Global Strategy 2007–2012: Uphold the Rights of the Poor and Oppressed*, available at www.lutheranworld.org/What_We_Do/DWS/DWS-Stratplan.pdf, accessed April 22, 2009.
10. *To Speak or Not to Speak: Criteria for Pronouncements in Situations of Human Rights Violations*, LWF Studies, 1984.
11. For example, O. Frederick Nolde, an American Lutheran theologian and representative of the World Council of Churches Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, became the leading ecumenical diplomat and best-known nongovernmental organization representative, lobbying for ecumenical goals in the formative years of the UN.
12. www.e-alliance.ch, accessed April 22, 2009.
13. www.isdn.org, accessed April 22, 2009.
14. www.icbl.org, accessed April 22, 2009.
15. www.e-alliance.ch/fileadmin/user_upload/docs/EAA_CovenantforAction_EN.pdf, accessed April 22, 2009.
16. ELCA News Service, 7 November 2005, available at archive.elca.org/ScriptLib/CO/ELCA_News/encArticleList.asp?article_3253, accessed April 22, 2009.
17. See the website: hrap.wikidot.com.

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