

The image shows the front cover of a book. The cover is made of dark red leather that is heavily worn, with numerous cracks and areas where the leather has peeled away, revealing a lighter, fibrous material underneath. In the center of the cover is a large, embossed decorative emblem. The emblem is symmetrical and features intricate scrollwork and floral patterns. A prominent horizontal tear runs across the middle of the cover, passing through the center of the emblem. The text is printed in a bold, sans-serif font in a light beige or cream color. The title is at the top, the subtitle is in the middle, and the author's name and preface information are at the bottom.

**THE LUTHERAN WORLD
FEDERATION TODAY:**

**MISSIO DEI, IMAGO DEI AND
THE ONGOING REFORMATION**

JONATHAN E. SHAW

WITH PREFACE BY MATTHEW C. HARRISON

THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION TODAY: MISSIO DEI, IMAGO DEI AND THE ONGOING REFORMATION

JONATHAN E. SHAW



1333 S. Kirkwood Road • St. Louis, MO 63122
888-THE LCMS • lcms.org

© 2024 The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE 3
Rev. Dr. Matthew C. Harrison, President of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

INTRODUCTION 6

PART I 7
Assembly History

PART II 17
The LWF Today, through the Lens of Its Thirteenth Assembly

APPENDIX 34
An Introduction and Evaluation of the Lutheran World Federation from the Theological Perspective of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

— ABBREVIATIONS USED —

AC	Augsburg Confession	KW	Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. <i>The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church</i> (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).
AE	<i>Luther's Works, American Edition</i> , ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann and Christopher Boyd Brown, 79 vols. (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Augsburg and Concordia Publishing House, 1955–).	SC	Small Catechism
Ap	Apology of the Augsburg Confession	SD	Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord
Ep	Epitome of the Formula of Concord	Trigl	<i>Triglōt Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, German-Latin-English</i> , trans. and ed. W. H. T. Dau and F. Bente (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921).
JDDJ	<i>Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification</i> (joint document by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church)	WA	<i>Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe</i> , 121 vols. (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau and H. Böhlau Nachfolger, 1883–2009).

PREFACE

Dear Lutheran Friend,

Grace and peace in Jesus Christ, our crucified and risen Savior! We commend this document on the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) to your careful attention. The Rev. Dr. Jonathan Shaw traces the emphases of LWF assemblies over the course of the decades and demonstrates the loss of the message of the very Gospel of Christ. In fact, as you will see, at the last assembly in Poland, the forgiveness of sins achieved by Christ's atoning death and resurrection (Rom. 4:25) was entirely excluded.

The *Assembly Study Guide* warned participants of “misleading theologies” and “false narratives.” Amazingly, the Assembly is told it is dangerous to hold that the words of the Bible are inspired and that the texts of the Bible have a single meaning. Jesus, during His temptation, replied to the devil's attacks by quoting the Old Testament with the preface, “It is written.” In the first instance, Jesus demonstrated both the absolute authority of the Scriptures and why they are authoritative, by citing Deuteronomy 8:3: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4). How strange the LWF should attack Luther's cardinal rule of exegesis, which freed the church from the medieval method that sought multiple meanings in the same text, quite foreign to the very words themselves. Luther wrote, “The Holy Spirit is the plainest writer and speaker in heaven and earth and therefore His words cannot have more than one, and that the very simplest sense, which we call the literal, ordinary, natural sense” (WA 7.650)¹.

Second, the Assembly was warned against theological unity, asserting, “Uniformity is the opposite of ‘reconciled diversity.’ ... The human desire for ... religious ... uniformity excludes, oppresses and ultimately destroys.” How strange our forefathers would find this assertion. The Augsburg Confession begins: “Our churches teach with common consent...”² The Lutheran Confessions charitably regard those believing Christians outside the Lutheran confession (Preface to the *Book of Concord*), yet desired together to confess Christ and His blessed Gospel of free forgiveness and all its articles, strictly according to the Bible, and therefore with unity.

1 Quotations marked WA are from *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 121 vols. (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau and H. Böhlau Nachfolger, 1883–2009).

2 Unless otherwise noted, quotations from the Lutheran Confessions are from *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 2nd ed. Edited by Paul McCain et al. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005).

This biblical yet charitable unity has been rejected by the LWF, and thus it has declared unity with churches and theologies that contradict the Gospel and the Lutheran teaching of the Sacrament in particular. This is because theologians no longer share the view of the Scriptures held by Christ, Luther and the confessors of the *Book of Concord*. What northern LWF leadership cares about is gender, and “reconciled diversity” is the path to convincing southern Lutherans that homosexuality is compatible with Christianity in northern contexts. But what happens in the north is coming south, and quickly.

Third, as Shaw demonstrates, the LWF rejects God’s order of creation, including sexual ordering. Real issues of inequity or injustice or maltreatment of women cannot be solved for Christians by rejecting God’s divine order of male and female. Women must have opportunity to serve in the church in dignified and significant ways, and they must be respected as sisters in Christ. Women must be treated with Christ-like respect and honored and revered by their husbands and family for their sacred vocations of mother, daughter, sister and wife. Ignoring the Bible on this issue has opened the floodgates to homosexuality. Not a single German church of the LWF has rejected homoerotic activity or even homosexual marriage. The money will flow south until the goal is achieved. The language remains ambiguous, but the cooperation with institutions universally in favor of the rejection of the Creator’s order for humankind is crystal clear.

Almost 500 years ago, Luther complained that the teaching of the Roman mass was *stracks wider* (absolutely contrary) to the “chief article,” for the grace of God is won solely by the merit of Jesus Christ’s cross and resurrection (SA II). When theologians and churches can no longer believe that the events and theology of the New Testament happened and are divinely given, they “contextualize” the theology of the divine Son of God, who came to “give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45), as a particular psychological need of the first-century mix of Jewish and pagan culture projected upon the man Jesus, quite aside from what His own religious views may have been. Today our needs are human rights, or justice, or alleged gender equity, queer this or that, or eco-justice. Thus, these become the “gospel” relevant for the day. However valid these issues may be, or whatever true concerns they raise that are compatible with the biblically informed Christian conscience, they ever remain matters of the law. And to be sure, Christians are to be concerned with the law, particularly the law of love. “Love your neighbor as yourself,” our Savior said, defining Christian vocation for all time. When the salvific facts and events of Christ, the God-man’s salvific life

and actions, withdraw in theology and church life, ethics (law) takes center stage. Unfortunately today, many no longer regard the Bible's definition of law or even natural law as tenable. We ask, "Where is Christ? Where is the Gospel in the LWF?"

Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. By His death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight (Romans 3 and 4). (Augsburg Confession IV)

There are many terrible problems in this world in family, state and church. We Lutherans do no favors to ourselves or to the world by creating substitute gospels. For it's finally this true Gospel of Christ that is our greatest strength, motivation and encouragement to live for Christ through our neighbor precisely in family, state and church.

Our churches teach that this faith is bound to bring forth good fruit. It is necessary to do good works commanded by God, because of God's will. We should not rely on those works to merit justification before God. The forgiveness of sins and justification is received through faith. The voice of Christ testifies, "So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty'" (Luke 17:10). The Fathers teach the same thing. Ambrose says, "It is ordained of God that he who believes in Christ is saved, freely receiving forgiveness of sins, without works, through faith alone." (Augsburg Confession VI)

Clinging to the cross of Christ,

REV. DR. MATTHEW C. HARRISON

President

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

Holy Week 2024

INTRODUCTION

This essay was first delivered in an abbreviated format on January 19, 2024, at the 47th Annual Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions, held at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind. The Rev. Dr. Jonathan E. Shaw is director of Church Relations for The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS).

Good morning. I sincerely appreciate the invitation to speak at this historic symposium and deliver this essay on the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). My assigned topic aligns well with the theme of this 47th Annual Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions, “SemineX at the Half-Century.” The LWF holds the aspirational ground of SemineX. To use compass-directional terms, the LWF is the moral and theological azimuth of SemineX. To use Hans-Georg Gadamer’s terms for navigating truth in a post-Kantian culture, SemineX and the LWF meet at the fusion of horizons.¹

In this paper, I provide a theological analysis of the LWF today. I begin with an historical review of preceding LWF assemblies, the main LWF organizational gatherings that occur about every six years. I offer a few theological assessments along the way, asking the question, “What does this mean?” The historical review draws chiefly on assembly background documents and is intended to provide context for understanding the LWF of today. The second part of the paper focuses on the LWF’s recent Thirteenth Assembly, held September 13–19, 2023, in Kraków, Poland. For this part, I draw on what I learned while in attendance at the Assembly and on materials published by the LWF in connection with the Assembly.² I offer a term frequency analysis based on the LWF’s most significant volume prepared for the Assembly and draw out a theological analysis of the LWF today.

1 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. and rev. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum Publishing Co., 1998), 374–397.

2 When referring to a specific, convened LWF gathering, Assembly is capitalized as the abbreviated proper name of that Assembly, here for the LWF Thirteenth Assembly.

PART I / ASSEMBLY HISTORY

LWF History

The end of the World War I bloodbath brought political and ecclesiastical movements aimed at making this “the war to end all wars.” Strategists were undeterred by Jesus’ eschatological prophecies of wars and rumors of war. By 1920, the soon-failed League of Nations was founded in Geneva with 41 member states. In 1923, the Lutheran World Convention (LWC) was launched to promote Lutheran church body unity at the altar and to coordinate post-war relief. By 1929, the LWC had adopted the broader goal of demonstrating Christian love by aiding all needy churches. A lack of LWC structure and the upheavals of World War II closed the LWC’s chapter on ecumenism.³

LWF First Assembly, 1947, Lund, Sweden⁴

The LWF was established in 1947 as a federation of Lutheran churches, seeking “greater fellowship and solidarity” and resting on the pillars of “rescue the needy, common initiatives in mission, joint efforts in theology, and a common response to the ecumenical challenge.”⁵ In many ways, the LWF picked up where the LWC left off.

The theme of LWF’s First Assembly was “The Lutheran Church in the World Today.” Some 200 delegates and 400 visitors from 47 church bodies in 26 countries gathered in the founding assembly. The first LWF constitution was signed, stating that member churches were in “free association.”⁶ Many attendees came from countries ravaged by World War II.⁷

3 Background drawn from Albert B. Collver III, “A Brief Status of Worldwide Lutheranism at the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation,” *Logia* 27, no. 3 (2018): 5–6; Gilbert A. Thiele, “The Lutheran World Federation,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 27 (1956): 445–447; LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Lutheran World Federation: An Introduction and Evaluation from the Theological Perspective of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2022), 1–2, <https://files.lcms.org/evaluation-lwf>. This CTCR document is included in the Appendix.

4 Assembly photos are available at www.flickr.com/photos/lutheranworld/albums/72157668194843942.

5 The Lutheran World Federation, “History of the LWF,” <https://lutheranworld.org/who-we-are/history-lwf/>; The Lutheran World Federation, *For Building Up the Body of Christ (Ephesians 4:12)—Lutheran World Federation Theological Education and Formation: An Historical Overview and a Look Ahead* (Geneva: LWF, 2023), 3.

6 Kjell Nordstokke, “The Ecclesiological Self-Understanding of the Lutheran World Federation: From ‘Free Association’ to ‘Communion of Churches,’” *The Ecumenical Review* 44 (1992): 479–490, quote at 479.

7 Summaries of the LWF assemblies presented in this paper draw on Jens Holger Schjørring, Prasanna Kumari, Norman A. Hjelm, eds., *From Federation to Communion: The History of the Lutheran World Federation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1997), 353–420; The Lutheran World Federation, *History of the LWF Assemblies since 1947*, <https://lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/LWF-Assemblies-since-1947.pdf>; LWF, *For Building Up the Body*, 3–20; Collver, “A Brief Status of Worldwide Lutheranism,” 5–14; Thiele, “The Lutheran World Federation,” 455–466; and other referenced works.

LWF Second Assembly, 1952, Hanover, Germany⁸

The theme of the Second Assembly was “The Living Word in a Responsible Church.” Some 227 delegates, 207 alternates and 801 visitors attended, with few representatives from Latin American, Asian and Eastern bloc countries. A highlight for attendees was a memorial service for the victims of war, held by the ruins of the *Aegidienkirche* (Aegidia Church). Assembly subthemes included: Lutheran ethics, Lutheran world missions, state and church, and refugee assistance.

LWF Third Assembly, 1957, Minneapolis, Minn., USA⁹

The theme of the Third Assembly was “Christ Frees and Unites.” Attending were 205 delegates from the USA and Europe, and 28 from Latin America, Africa and Asia. Against the stated contexts of African colonialism, Asian political persecution and Cold War tensions, subthemes included: freedom in Christ, freedom to reform the church, freedom for service in the world, and free and united in hope.

LWF Fourth Assembly, 1963, Helsinki, Finland¹⁰

The theme of the Fourth Assembly was “Christ Today.” Participants included 267 delegates and 413 other participants, with 21 new churches joining. The LWF reported that it was a time of “ecumenical breakthroughs,” with the Second Vatican Council and the establishment of the LWF’s own Lutheran Foundation for Interconfessional Research, later becoming the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg. The Assembly wrestled seriously with the doctrine of justification but failed to find desired consensus language to reframe the doctrine of justification and make it “relevant for ‘people of today.’”¹¹

LWF Fifth Assembly, 1970, Évian, France¹²

The theme of the Fifth Assembly was “Sent into the World,” not apt given the spa location of Évian, but this reflected a late change. The East German government derailed Assembly plans to meet in Weimar, and human rights violation protests overturned the fallback location of Porto Alegre, Brazil, with Évian being chosen just five

8 Assembly photos are available at www.flickr.com/photos/lutheranworld/albums/72157667797568230.

9 Assembly photos are available at www.flickr.com/photos/lutheranworld/albums/72157667797906860.

10 Assembly photos are available at www.flickr.com/photos/lutheranworld/albums/72157667798204650.

11 LWF, “1963 | Fourth LWF Assembly,” linked at *Past Assemblies and Themes*, <https://lutheranworld.org/who-we-are/governance-and-oversight/assembly>. For a discussion of the difficulties seeking to connect justification with experience, see Schjørring, *From Federation to Communion*, 377–379.

12 Assembly photos are available at www.flickr.com/photos/lutheranworld/albums/72157668522257605.

weeks out from the start date. Attendance was about half that of the previous assembly. Youth protests at the *Palais des Congrès* represented well the political turmoil and social unrest that ruled the Évian day. Youth representatives demanded change. Human rights, diversity of thinking, social programs and an expanded role for women dominated the Assembly. Confessional Lutheran theology was not the point. Regarding the development of its own identity, the LWF has assessed this Assembly as being the most important of all its assemblies, past or present.¹³

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

This is likely the only assessment where we can demonstrate complete agreement between the LWF and the Rev. Dr. David P. Scaer,¹⁴ though each holds the Fifth Assembly to be most important for opposing reasons. Dr. Scaer, the Rev. Dr. J.A.O. Preus (then LCMS president) and three others were official LCMS observers at Évian.¹⁵ Dr. Preus asked Dr. Scaer to prepare a book documenting the Évian Assembly. Concordia Publishing House published Dr. Scaer's *The Lutheran World Federation Today* in 1971. Scaer's Assembly assessment follows:

Evian marked a turning point for the LWF. ...

Lutherans cannot escape the historical burden that they have been associated with the Pauline-Lutheran doctrine of justification through faith. It is the *sine qua non* of their existence. If there is no real agreement and doctrinal harmony on this issue, all other specifically doctrinal or theological discussion, arguments, etc., have no real validity. For Lutherans all doctrines revolve around and reflect this one. Without this all the rest collapses. This theological collapse came at Evian. ...

The goal of the church was said to be the improvement of society. Three steps can be traced to bring about this universal contentment in society: (1) all Lutherans should unite; (2) Lutherans should join all Christians in a further universal union; and (3) the Christian church should unite with the humane forces in the world to bring about

13 "The Fifth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, held in July 1970 in Evian, France (near Geneva), had a greater impact on the development of the Federation than any previous or subsequent assembly," Schjörring, *From Federation to Communion*, 382.

14 Scaer holds the inaugural chair of the David P. Scaer Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind. His biography and extensive works of note are available at www.ctsfw.edu/about/faculty/dr-david-scaer/.

15 Their status outstripped mine at Kraków, where I was admitted with visitor status.

the best possible conditions for all people. This last step is technically called “secular ecumenism.” ...

The final reality was not the forgiveness of sins and the coming of Christ to gather the elect, but an earthly paradise brought about through man’s efforts. ...

The LWF as a confessional force and voice in the world was dead.¹⁶

LWF Sixth Assembly, 1977, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania¹⁷

The theme of the Sixth Assembly was “In Christ—A New Community.” The LWF Assembly in Tanzania was the first held in Africa and the Global South. Of the 250 voting delegates, 40 percent came from the Global South and almost 25 percent were women.

In many ways, the Sixth Assembly followed the lead of Évian. Major discussion focused on Southern African apartheid, rejecting racial separation in the church; women’s equality, proclaiming no distinction between men and women in all aspects of the life of the church; reconciled diversity, setting it as the principle of LWF ecumenical work; and social and economic justice, focusing church efforts to engage “root causes.”¹⁸

LWF Seventh Assembly, 1984, Budapest, Hungary¹⁹

The theme of the Seventh Assembly was “In Christ—Hope for the World.” Attendees in Budapest, the first assembly held in a Communist country, swelled to 1,500, with 315 voting delegates and about 1,200 others. Guests included representatives from the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, the Federation of Protestant Churches in Switzerland and the Jewish World Congress. Three hundred youth were present, some of whom gave a presentation on global injustices before leading Assembly participants to form a human chain weaving around the assembly hall in solidarity of protest. Participants were encouraged to fast and pray to show “the anguish of

¹⁶ David P. Scaer, *The Lutheran World Federation Today* (St. Louis: CPH, 1971), 14, 15, 16, 18, 41. Scaer provides an insightful and entertaining account of the cut and thrust of life at the Assembly.

¹⁷ Assembly photos are available at www.flickr.com/photos/lutheranworld/albums/72157667798727370.

¹⁸ Schjørring, *From Federation to Communion*, 400.

¹⁹ Assembly photos are available at www.flickr.com/photos/lutheranworld/albums/72157668430211296.

a suffering world and the signs of hope we experience.”²⁰

Major decisions included suspending two Southern African apartheid churches (a first-time LWF use of power *over* member churches), committing to achieve 50 percent women delegates by the Ninth Assembly, and declaring LWF member churches to be in altar and pulpit fellowship by constitutional change.²¹

LWF Eighth Assembly, 1990, Curitiba, Brazil²²

The theme of the Eighth Assembly was “I Have Heard the Cry of My People.” The theme was chosen to represent the suffering of Third World peoples and of a creation violated by “pollution and greed.” Assembly business of LWF restructuring led to a decisive constitutional change. The old frame of the LWF as a “free association” was officially changed to “a communion of churches . . . united in pulpit and altar fellowship.”²³

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

By way of LWF membership, every member church thus declared itself to be in church body fellowship with every other LWF church body. The possibility of disagreement in doctrine and practice being divisive for church fellowship was now overruled, at least officially, by the LWF constitution and operationalized by the concept of reconciled diversity.

LWF Ninth Assembly, 1997, Hong Kong, China²⁴

The theme of the Ninth Assembly was “In Christ—Called to Witness.” One week after the British transfer of sovereignty back to China, the Ninth Assembly met to celebrate the LWF’s 50th anniversary. The theme of witnessing was parsed into the LWF witness: to Christian unity, toward a just society, and in multifaith and multicultural contexts. Predominant was the LWF’s witness to broader Christian unity through

20 A photo of the Assembly youth presentation is available at www.flickr.com/photos/lutheran-world/26467943874/in/album-72157668430211296. Youth account and quote from the LWF, “Assembly History Banners: Budapest, Hungary 1984,” linked during LWF Thirteenth Assembly meetings from *Assembly Online Documentation*, <https://assembly.lutheranworld.org/s/LGwtGqCPpM58ZTn>, but no longer available online. Those interested in a copy of the Assembly History Banners may request such through the LWF contact form available at <http://lutheranworld.org/form/contact-form#no-back>.

21 On the LWF suspension of two LWF member churches, see Schjørring, *From Federation to Communion*, 408–409.

22 Assembly photos are available at www.flickr.com/photos/lutheranworld/albums/72157667799183560.

23 Where the Seventh Assembly had called the LWF a communion, the administrative restructuring and constitutional changes supporting this were left to the Eighth Assembly. The two-thirds majority requirement for constitutional change was met, 238–103, with resistance from some member churches concerned over their loss of autonomy and the centralization of LWF power in its secretariat. See Schjørring, *From Federation to Communion*, 416–418, and Nordstokke, *Self-Understanding of the LWF*, 479–490.

24 Assembly photos are available at www.flickr.com/photos/lutheranworld/albums/72157667799312310.

its adoption of the LWF-Roman Catholic jointly prepared document, the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ)*. *JDDJ* proclaimed an ecumenical triumph:

The understanding of the doctrine of justification set forth in this Declaration shows that a consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification exists between Lutherans and Catholics. ... The teaching of the Lutheran churches presented in this Declaration does not fall under the condemnations from the Council of Trent. The condemnations in the Lutheran Confessions do not apply to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church presented in this Declaration.²⁵

Condemnations between Lutherans and Roman Catholics based on disagreement over the doctrine of justification would no longer be considered valid.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

In truth, *JDDJ* was an LWF surrender to Roman Catholic theologians, who had long taught that man was justified before God by grace through faith in Christ, but not by faith alone. Beginning with the Council of Trent (1545–1563), Rome’s position has been:

If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone in the sense that nothing else is required by way of cooperation in order to obtain the grace of justification and that it is not at all necessary that he should be prepared and disposed by the movement of his will, let him be anathema. ... If anyone says that men are justified either by the imputation of Christ’s justice alone or by the remission of sins alone, excluding grace and charity that is poured into their hearts by the Holy Spirit and inheres in them, or also that the grace that justifies us is only the favor of God, let him be anathema.²⁶

Rome’s old inclusion of works within the doctrine of justification surfaces in *JDDJ* section 4.2, “Justification as Forgiveness of Sins *and* Making Righteous.” Paragraph 22 states:

25 LWF and the Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999), section 5, “The Significance and Scope of the Consensus Reached,” para. 40, 41, <https://lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/Joint%20Declaration%20on%20the%20Doctrine%20of%20Justification.pdf>, hereafter *JDDJ*.

26 Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, ed. Peter Hünermann, 43rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), Decree on Justification, can. 9, 11. DH 1559, 1561.

We [the LWF and Roman Catholics] confess together that God forgives sin by grace ... and imparts the gift of new life in Christ. ... God no longer imputes to them their sin and through the Holy Spirit effects in them an active love. These two aspects of God's gracious action *are not to be separated*.²⁷

This is the Roman Catholic teaching on justification: It mixes God's declared righteousness with human works of love. Faith receives the declaration of righteousness, but only in connection with human works of preparation (*gratia preveniens*), of reception (*gratia infusa*) and of habituation (*habitus gratiae*). God's declared righteousness and the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake are contingent in *JDDJ* on the material righteousness of human works.

How different from the theology of the Lutheran Confessions. Consider the Formula of Concord's Epitome, Article III, "Concerning the Righteousness of Faith before God."

We believe, teach, and confess that our righteousness before God consists in this, that God forgives us our sins by sheer grace, without any works, merit, or worthiness of our own, *in the past, at present, or in the future* We believe, teach, and confess that for the retention of pure teaching concerning the righteousness of faith before God, it is particularly important to hold steadfastly to the *particulae exclusivae*, that is, the following expressions of the holy apostle Paul that *completely separate the merit of Christ from our works* and give honor to Christ alone. The holy apostle Paul writes, "by grace," "without merit," "apart from the law," "apart from works," "not through works," etc. These expressions all mean nothing other than that we become righteous and receive salvation "alone through faith" in Christ.²⁸

For the LWF, *JDDJ* may indeed be a witness to Christian unity but, for confessional Lutherans, it is a false witness. First, it gets the doctrine of justification wrong, allowing the mixture of human works of preparation, reception or result into God's declaration of righteousness based on Christ's works alone, received through

27 *JDDJ*, section 4.2, "Justification as Forgiveness of Sins and Making Righteous," para. 22, emphasis added.

28 Ep III 4, 10, pp. 495, 496 in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles Arand et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), hereafter KW, emphasis added. See also SD III 36–43, KW 562–573.

faith alone. Second, it gets the doctrine of fellowship, or unity, wrong. For confessional Lutherans, the practice of church unity requires agreement in “the doctrine [i.e., of justification] and all its articles.”²⁹ All articles of the Christian faith are understood to emanate from, or grow out of, the doctrine of justification. To foul the doctrine of justification is to undercut the very possibility of God-pleasing church unity, a sad irony for an organization committed to ecumenism.

LWF Tenth Assembly, 2003, Winnipeg, Canada³⁰

The theme of the Tenth Assembly was “For the Healing of the World.” Presenters spoke of healing that occurs through justification, communion, overcoming ecumenical and multifaith divisions, removing injustices, confronting globalization, defending indigenous peoples, remediating poverty, and honoring the environment. To reflect the LWF’s constitution and self-understanding of member churches being in communion with each other, delegates changed the organization’s official name to “The Lutheran World Federation—A Communion of Churches.”³¹

LWF Eleventh Assembly, 2010, Stuttgart, Germany³²

The theme of the Eleventh Assembly was “Give Us Today Our Daily Bread,” and it marked the first assembly in Germany since 1952 in Hannover. As at every assembly, new leadership was elected: as president, the Rev. Munib Younan, bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land; and as general secretary, the Rev. Martin Junge of Chile. The Assembly’s major commitments were to speak out for God’s people—working across religious faith boundaries—and to care for the creation. This included redoubling efforts to work for justice regarding gender; food; climate; migrants; and those suffering from HIV, AIDS and “illegitimate debt.”³³

29 SD XI 31, p. 1063 in *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, German-Latin-English*, trans. and ed. W. H. T. Dau and F. Bente (St. Louis: CPH, 1921), hereafter *Trigl*.

30 Assembly photos are available at www.flickr.com/photos/lutheranworld/albums/72157668430679856.

31 LWF, “2003 | Tenth LWF Assembly,” linked at *Past Assemblies and Themes*, <https://lutheranworld.org/who-we-are/governance-and-oversight/assembly>.

32 Assembly photos are available at www.flickr.com/photos/lutheranworld/albums/72157669138509386.

33 LWF, “11. 2010, Stuttgart, Germany,” *History of the LWF Assemblies since 1947*, <https://lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/LWF-Assemblies-since-1947.pdf>, 14–15.

LWF Twelfth Assembly, 2017, Windhoek, Namibia³⁴

The theme of the Twelfth Assembly was “Liberated by God’s Grace.” Aiming to honor the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, the theme of God’s liberating grace was divided into three parts, each proclaimed to be “not for sale”: salvation, human beings and creation. The Rev. Dr. Musa Panti Filibus, archbishop of the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria, was elected LWF president. Assembly public statements addressed Namibian genocide and reconciliation, Venezuelan unrest, and Indonesian religious politicization. The Assembly passed 26 resolutions, including: add gender justice to the LWF constitution; affirm women’s ordained ministry and study their experiences; distinguish LWF binding practices from guidelines; grow interreligious relations; demand sex education and the elimination of sexual and gender-based violence; advocate an humanitarian response and peaceful resolution to the war in Syria; reject Asian religious persecution, inequality of resources and commercialization of creation; and call for progress in refugee and migration relief, youth participation, and climate change.³⁵

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

This Assembly trisected a Reformation theme, “Liberated by God’s Grace,” into salvation, human beings and creation — each being “not for sale.” Not in view was the Reformation distinction of the two kingdoms of the right and left. For confessional Lutherans, in the spiritual realm on the right, God rules by His revealed Word and Sacraments, creating faith in Christ to bring personal, eternal salvation and loving service to others. In the civil realm on the left, God rules in a hidden way through coercive power and law, establishing a modicum of earthly order and justice to punish evil and protect good. The Assembly set an equivalence of God’s grace regarding salvation, human beings and creation. This confuses the two kingdoms and charts an LWF course which, on the right, muddies the pure Word of God with coercive power and empties Christ of His purpose to atone for, and save, sinners through faith in His holy, bloody sacrifice. On the left, the LWF, which considers itself a communion, inserts itself and meddles in governmental, social and political matters. It is ironic and tragic to see such a mixing of the kingdoms at the 500th commemoration of the Reformation, especially when Luther and the Lutheran Confessions railed against the papal mixture of the kingdoms.

34 Forty folders of 2017 Assembly photos are available at www.flickr.com/photos/lutheranworld/albums/with/72157680954088682, with opening worship photos at www.flickr.com/photos/lutheranworld/albums/72157680529526603.

35 To explore the themes, elections and outcomes of the LWF’s Twelfth Assembly, 2017, Windhoek, Namibia, see LWF, “Liberated by God’s Grace,” <https://2017.lwfassembly.org/en>.

Summary of Part I

By way of past assembly review, I have sought to show how the LWF has arrived at its current state. Theological assessments along the way have demonstrated its loss of confessional Lutheran theology, its rejection of the Lutheran doctrine of justification and the related practice of church unity, its arch toward secular ecumenism, its self-redefinition as a practicing communion based on reconciled diversity, and its confusion of the two kingdoms with the associated loss of the Gospel of free forgiveness of sins and justification by faith in Christ. This has been replaced by a liberal agenda of political, social, sexual, gender and environmental justice and reconciliation.

PART II / THE LWF TODAY, THROUGH THE LENS OF ITS THIRTEENTH ASSEMBLY

LWF Thirteenth Assembly, September 13–19, 2023, Kraków, Poland

The theme of the Thirteenth Assembly was “One Body, One Spirit, One Hope.”³⁶ The Assembly was hosted by the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Poland (ECACP), an LWF member church that began ordaining women in 2022. The hosting church body provided local parishes for Sunday worship opportunities.³⁷ About 350 delegates gathered, with 40 percent women, 40 percent men and 20 percent youth, by region. By my estimate, perhaps another 700 guests, presenters, advisors, associates, visitors, volunteers and staff were also present. Delegates attended pre-assemblies to help them understand the Assembly theme, issues, rules and procedures for nominations and resolutions. Regional pre-assemblies occurred in Europe, the Americas, Africa and Asia earlier in 2023. Pre-assemblies were also held in Poland just prior to the Assembly. These were for youth (delegates 18–30 years old, “important leaders in the church today”), women (to speak with one voice, highlighting ordained ministry), and men (a pre-assembly first, with a focus on gender justice policy). Each of these three groups presented a reflection with their priorities to the Assembly.³⁸

36 For background on the Assembly, its theme, programs, news, outcomes, press releases, photos, videos and other resources, see LWF, “One Body, One Spirit, One Hope,” <https://2023.lwfassembly.org>. On pre-assemblies, see <https://2023.lwfassembly.org/assembly/pre-assemblies>.

37 For ECACP history and background, see Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Poland in collaboration with the LWF, *Welcome to Poland: An Introduction to the Host Church and County—LWF Thirteenth Assembly, Kraków, Poland, 13–19 September 2023* (Geneva: LWF, 2023), <https://2023.lwfassembly.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/2023A%20-%20Welcome%20to%20Poland%20EN%2020230706.pdf>. ECACP women have served as deacons, led church services and administered baptism since 1999, <https://lutheranworld.org/news/polish-church-votes-ordain-women-pastors>. As the hosting church body, ECACP provided Sunday worship services in local congregations, with remote services offered in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. As a self-identified communion, the LWF provided daily services at the Assembly site.

38 During a question-and-answer period following the general secretary’s remarks, a delegate raised the question of a “wrongful” omission of a separate pre-assembly for indigenous peoples. Assembly members and the general secretary reacted favorably to the suggestion, so perhaps the next assembly will see this addition.

Assembly Opening Worship



Figure 1. Assembly Opening Worship³⁹

The opening worship service was remarkable for its multicultural and multilingual liturgy, sermon, and communion, and those even remotely interested should view the video.⁴⁰ The sermon was based on Matthew 2:1–12 and preached by the Rev. Danielle Dokman of Suriname. She liberally paraphrased the Wise Men and asked: “Where is the Incarnate One born to disrupt the status quo?” She offered three answers: (1) He is in a holy, vulnerable body and, so, with us in hope in our holy, vulnerable bodies, which are abused by gender discrimination, slavery and religion; (2) He is present in the Spirit, which ripples and disrupts powerful Herod’s plans; and (3) He is with us as we disrupt the corrupt powers of injustice and ecological catastrophe today, so that when the sun sets on the empire of injustice, we will “rise like a star.” The message received thunderous applause and woo-hoos. The sermon set the theological content and tone for the Assembly.

Equally stunning for confessional Lutherans was the communion *epiclesis*, or prayer to the Holy Spirit, built on mystic naturalism and not on faith in the atoning Christ: “Come, Holy Spirit, and make of us the body of Christ. Breathe onto this bread and wine, that it brings us your life. Spirit, *come from the four winds*, and enliven this Thirteenth LWF Assembly.”⁴¹ Bread and wine were offered, with gluten-free wafers and grape juice upon request.

³⁹ Opening worship photo by Jonathan E. Shaw.

⁴⁰ Video of the September 13, 2023, Assembly opening worship service is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZUBk202hil&ab_channel=TheLutheranWorldFederation. The sermon begins at 41:53 of the video.

⁴¹ LWF, *Reconciled and Renewed: Assembly Worship* (Geneva: LWF, 2023), 42, emphasis added, <https://lutheran-world.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/2023A%20-%20Liturgy.pdf>.

LWF Core Functions

In terms of its core functions, each LWF assembly is “responsible for the Constitution; gives general direction to the work of the Communion; elects the President and the members of the Council; [and] acts on the reports of the President, the General Secretary and the Chairperson of the Finance Committee.”⁴² Each assembly also has certain witness and service functions. Assembly outcomes include an Assembly message, resolutions, and public statements and are important reflections of LWF values.⁴³ The Rev. Henrik Stubkjær, bishop of the Viborg diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark, was elected president. The Rev. Dr. Anne Burghardt, a theologian of the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church, continued as LWF general secretary, with her term running from 2021 to 2028. The general secretary serves as the LWF’s chief executive officer, chief ecumenical officer and chief spokesman. A detailed Assembly agenda was distributed in hard copy, which included a financial report (exhibit 5.5). Interestingly, for LWF income from 2017 to 2022, on average 39 percent came from Augusta Victoria Hospital, Jerusalem; 30 percent from international non-governmental organizations; 25 percent from the United Nations and government grants; and 2 percent from membership dues and an endowment fund disbursement. Total 2022 LWF income was reported as €178 million.

Assembly Theme

The 2023 Thirteenth Assembly theme was “One Body, One Spirit, One Hope,” drawn from St. Paul in Ephesians 4:4–6. The central document that explored this theme was the *Study Guide: LWF Thirteenth Assembly Kraków, Poland 13–19 September 2023*.⁴⁴ This document followed

42 LWF, *Handbook: A Practical Guide to the Assembly, LWF Thirteenth Assembly Kraków, Poland 13–19 September 2023* (Geneva: LWF, 2023), 10, <https://2023.lwfassembly.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/2023A%20Handbook%20EN.pdf>.

43 The Thirteenth Assembly message, public statements and resolutions are available at <https://2023.lwfassembly.org/assembly/outcomes>. Especially the Assembly message merits study, as it reflects the Assembly’s values. Representative are these extracts, “*The incarnation challenges us to recognize God in every person and in all of creation, acknowledging our deep-down unity. . . . But we live in a divided world, where bodies are hurting, rejected, excluded, and the earth, our shared home, is suffering from the effects of growing environmental and climate emergencies. . . . We reject all forms of violence and discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, age, disability, xenophobia, caste, or social background. All people are created in the image of God, with equal dignity that cannot be compromised. . . . We reiterate the call of the LWF, first made almost four decades ago, to affirm the full participation of women in the ordained ministry. . . . The LWF is a communion of churches proclaiming the gospel in different ways, across all seasons, cultures, economies, and political contexts Hope empowers us to speak out in the public space for justice and human rights*” (emphasis original).

44 LWF, *Study Guide: LWF Thirteenth Assembly Kraków, Poland 13–19 September 2023* (Geneva: LWF, 2023), <https://2023.lwfassembly.org/sites/default/files/2023-08/2023A%20-%20Study%20Guide%20No%20photo%20EN.pdf>, hereafter *Assembly Study Guide*, available also in Dutch, French, German and Spanish at <https://2023.lwfassembly.org/resources/assembly-study-guide>.

in the stream of theological development established by preceding LWF assemblies: fighting political, social, gender, sexual and ecological injustices; ensuring the fullness of diversity inside and outside the church; and invigorating ecumenism to include those in Christian churches, those in other faiths and those of no religion. But there were three noticeable changes with this Assembly: (1) an increased use of Lutheran theological language, albeit with changed meaning; (2) explicit condemnations of the misleading theologies, generally code language for confessional Lutheranism; and (3) a soft-peddalling of sexual and gender issues problematic to the Global South. More on these later.

Presentations to the Assembly reflected the theme and were aligned with the talking points of the *Assembly Study Guide*. This was especially clear in the plenary lectures on the three elements of the theme—one body, one spirit, one hope—presented by speakers from Indonesia, Ethiopia and Sweden.⁴⁵ A single exception was one sentence spoken by the plenary speaker exploring the meaning of “One Spirit,” who noted that “the Word of God, the Good News of Jesus Christ, the message of forgiveness and reconciliation at our hands are incomparably more powerful than those destructive hate narratives.” This was the one and only sentence delivered in prepared remarks to the Assembly during the entire week that even mentioned the forgiveness of sins, and this without any further comment.

The heavy theological lifting was accomplished by keynote speaker Monsignor Professor Dr. Tomáš Halík, a Czech Roman Catholic theologian and philosopher. An articulate proponent of secular ecumenism, Halík argued that the ongoing reformation of the church requires universal ecumenical openness and a willingness for Christianity to step outside of itself. He noted that the resurrected Christ was changed in form, but nonetheless could be recognized in His wounds and in His breaking of bread with strangers. For Halík, this means that the faithful must come to exercise a deep solidarity with all humanity and creation, identifying with them in their woundedness and caring for their needs in this world. The ongoing reformation means “one body, one Spirit, one hope. It is not only with all Christians, but with all human beings and all forms of life on earth that we form one body.” The Assembly replied with a standing ovation.⁴⁶

45 The Rev. Dr. Benny Sinaga spoke on “One Body.” He is an Indonesian New Testament scholar; president of a female-only seminary, Sekolah Tinggi Bibelwrou; and from the Batak Christian Protestant Church in Indonesia. The Rev. Dr. Bruk Ayele spoke on “One Spirit.” He is president of the Mekane Yesus seminary and from the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus. Archbishop Emerita Antje Jackelén spoke on “One Hope.” She is the former archbishop of the Church of Sweden and outgoing vice-president of the LWF Nordic region churches.

46 For the text of Halík’s keynote address, see <https://catholicoutlook.org/keynote-speech-at-the-13-general-assembly-of-the-lutheran-world-federation-lwf/>.

What does this mean? Only this: That if you can set aside what is decisive—Christ’s atoning death and justifying resurrection, His imputed righteousness, sin forgiven through faith and baptism, and the new man’s life in accord with God’s Law—then you can certainly justify a “churchly” focus on secular ecumenism, secular justice and pantheistic unity.

Assembly Study Guide

As the central and authoritative document for understanding the Assembly’s theme, the *Assembly Study Guide* must be studied very carefully. It uses certain terms of classical Lutheran theology in new ways to support LWF doctrines and practices. Term frequency, the number of occurrences of a word (or related words or word sets) in a document, shows relative importance. The *Assembly Study Guide* demonstrates the following term frequencies:

TERM	FREQUENCY OF OCCURRENCE
Mission <i>(mission of the church, mission of God)</i>	57
Gospel	44
Baptism <i>(baptismal, baptisms)</i>	44
Misleading, false <i>(misleading theologies, misled; false narratives, false claims, false prophets)</i>	18
Image <i>(image of God, image of the Creator, image of the creation, image of the body)</i>	16
Theology of the cross	8
Righteousness <i>(fruits of righteousness)</i>	1
Evangelism <i>(“baptizing” uniformity in the name of evangelism)</i>	1
Forgive or forgiveness	0
Atone or atonement	0
Repent or repentance	0

***Missio Dei*: Mission, Mission of God, Mission of the Church**

The term frequency of “mission” calls for further analysis. Use varies somewhat, but standard examples are “God’s holistic mission,” “the church’s role in that mission,” and “the creative, reconciling and renewing mission of God.” A more extended and representative unfolding of the meaning of the term is: “The church serves God’s mission of reconciling all things with God, and thereby reconciling human beings with one another and with creation. Its calling is to live and witness to this unity in reconciled diversity . . . to all bodies and all creation.” Invariably the verbs are present tense; God’s mission has not yet been accomplished, but God sends His church into the world for this purpose.⁴⁷

This LWF use of “mission” reflects the reformed, liberal church *missio Dei* framework. In the early 1930s, Karl Barth first framed the mission of the church as *actio Dei* (the action of God), and German missiologist Karl Hartenstein changed the term to *missio Dei* (the mission of God). Against missionary activities viewed by some, to include the LWF, as expressions of Western imperialism, denominational expansionism and sociological structuralism, this *missio Dei* framework focused on the continuing mission of the Holy Trinity to reach humanity. In this *missio Dei* approach, the church is sent into the world as the instrument of the Holy Trinity. David J. Bosch explains:

Mission was understood . . . in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology or soteriology. . . . The classical doctrine on the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another “movement”: The Father, Son and the Holy Spirit sending the church into the world. . . . Mission is thereby seen as a movement from God to the world; the church is viewed as an *instrument* for that mission. There is church because there is mission, not vice versa. To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God’s love toward people, since God is a fountain of sending love.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ *Assembly Study Guide*, 4, 8, 18.

⁴⁸ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991) 389–390, emphasis added. On the development of the *missio Dei* framework, see pp. 389–393. The 1952 World Missionary Conference held in Willingen, Germany, brought *missio Dei* to the forefront of missiological discussion, but led to multiple interpretations, from theological Trinitarian movement to sociological ecumenical movement. For a brief overview of the significance of Willingen, see Klaus Detlev Schultz, “Revisiting the *Mission Dei* Concept: Commemorating Willingen, July 15–17, 1952,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (October 2002): 364–368.

This understanding of mission, which sets aside the completion of the atonement in favor of the church being sent into the world on a non-soteriological mission, is the foundation of the LWF theme of “One Body, One Spirit, One Hope.” For the LWF, this construct is the basis for the church being sent into the world not to preach Christ crucified for forgiveness, but to work for the eradication of all human injustices and to spread a message of inclusion for reconciliation between all life forms.

Classical Lutheran theology understands *missio Dei* in an entirely different sense. The Father gives His one-and-only mission to His Son. The crucified Christ atones for the sins of the world, satisfies the Father’s just wrath over sin, and accomplishes the mission externally by His works: Τετέλεσται (It is completed).⁴⁹ The resurrected Christ promises His active power through His Spirit in the church’s preaching and sacramental administration. The Spirit completes the work of Christ *internally* by creating and sustaining saving faith, delivering the forgiveness of sins, and keeping Christ’s flock safe and steadfast unto His return on the Last Day.⁵⁰

Gospel

The high term frequency of “gospel” (44) also calls for careful investigation. The term “gospel” is not explicitly defined in the *Assembly Study Guide*, but its meaning may be derived from its use. The gospel “shape[s] our journey,” “unites us in one confession,” “questions cultural norms,” and “bear[s] witness ... to reform unjust power structures and reconcile divisions.”⁵¹ These and other references depict the gospel as a belief set for confronting injustices, divisions and power structures. Clearly, the LWF gospel is not Christ’s redemptive work that stands *coram deo* for the righteousness of humanity, but humanity’s work that stands *coram mundo* for the reform and reconciliation of creation.

This understanding of gospel as human work is perhaps clearest here: “The LWF has always understood the gospel in terms of service. ... Today, LWF’s ministries continue to compassionately serve the bodies of displaced, marginalized and excluded people around the world.”⁵² Whereas it is true that every Christian does, by Christian faith and

49 John 19:30.

50 Another (third) *missio Dei* framework focuses on anthropocentric methods, means and goals to build the church and expand God’s kingdom. Christ is presented as having died for the sins of the world, with God handing off to the church the mission to find the best ways to reach out and save souls.

51 *Assembly Study Guide*, 4, 8, 12, 18.

52 *Assembly Study Guide*, 21.

baptism into Christ, desire to serve his neighbor, forgive and seek reconciliation for grievances, as well as provide for the needy, this itself is *not* the Gospel, neither are our works the foundation of faith.

The Formula of Concord's Solid Declaration, Article V, "Law and Gospel," expresses what the *Assembly Study Guide* omits, and what confessional Lutherans believe:

The gospel in its strict sense teaches what people should believe, namely, that they receive from God the forgiveness of sins; that is, that the Son of God, our Lord Christ, has taken upon himself the curse of the law and borne it, atoned and paid for all our sins; that through him alone we are restored to God's grace, obtain the forgiveness of sins through faith, and are delivered from death and all the punishments of our sins and are saved eternally. . . . It is good news, joyous news, that God does not want to punish sin but to forgive it for Christ's sake. . . . All repentant sinners should believe in, that is, place their trust alone in, the Lord Christ, who "was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification."⁵³

The *Assembly Study Guide's* omission of the Lutheran understanding of the Gospel should not be viewed as accidental, but as essential to LWF theology. The *Assembly Study Guide* expands Augsburg Confession, Article II, "Original Sin," as follows: "The root of all systems of oppression, division and exclusion lies in a fundamental refusal to see, trust and respect the image of God in a fellow being, whose body is different."⁵⁴ Even more clearly, "The world was created good, in a profound harmony that was then broken by sin, by human beings turning in upon themselves When we turn in upon ourselves, creation and our fellow human beings are exploited for one's own gain or for the benefit of only one community. Such self-defined communities that are curved in upon themselves demand uniformity."⁵⁵

The LWF's working definition of sin is the human drive to exclude other people, to insist on uniformity regarding bodies, to perpetuate human injustice based on self-centeredness. Although it is certainly true that sin curves man in on himself, the *original* sin—the essential and inherited sin—is, according to the Augsburg Confession, Article II,

53 SD V 20–22, KW 585.

54 *Assembly Study Guide*, 16.

55 *Assembly Study Guide*, 7.

being “without fear of God, without trust in God, and with concupis-
cence.”⁵⁶ The point is that the LWF can define the gospel as human ac-
tion in the world because that is the essence of how it defines original
sin. But where original sin is understood to be what it actually is—in
its essence against God and imputed by God to all—there the Gos-
pel must also be grounded in the imputation of God, in God’s work
and, finally, in His forgiveness based on the atoning blood of Christ.
“Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins
are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count
his sin.”⁵⁷

It is only in this light, in the LWF’s misunderstanding of the Gospel,
that one can account for the following *Assembly Study Guide* term
frequencies: occurrences of “forgive” or “forgiveness” (0), occurrences
of “atone” or “atonement” (0), occurrences of “repent” or “repentance”
(0), occurrences of “evangelism” (1, in a negative context).

***Imago Dei*: Image, Image of God, Image of the Creator, Image of the Creation, Image of the Body**

The LWF’s doctrine of sin and the Gospel goes hand in hand with its
doctrine of the image of God. The *Assembly Study Guide* references
the image of God in human bodies and in creation 16 times while
condemning forms of personal abuse, discrimination or exclusion;
any “dominant idea of ‘normal’”; and any “systems of oppression, di-
vision and exclusion.” Patriarchal leadership in the home and church
is classified as “denying women both the right to live with dignity
and freedom, and the ability to serve with their God-given gifts.”⁵⁸
According to the LWF *Assembly Study Guide*, the image of God is the
dignity and respect belonging to all people and all creation, period.
The Godhead and any posited orders of creation or distinctions of sex
are not in view.

This is problematic for a number of reasons. First, it excludes the
biblical and confessional definitions of the image of God as the
perfect righteousness that belonged to Adam and Eve, by which they
possessed “the knowledge of God, fear of God, trust in God, and the
like.”⁵⁹ Second, it omits the biblical and confessional testimony that

56 AC II 1 Latin, KW 37, 39.

57 Rom. 4:7–8 ESV. St. Paul elucidates this teaching of double imputation—of original sin and of the righteousness of Christ—in Rom. 5:12–21.

58 *Assembly Study Guide*, 12, 16, 31.

59 Ap II 18 Latin, KW 115.

humanity lost the image of God in the fall.⁶⁰ Third, it fails to note that the image of God is being renewed by the Holy Spirit now in Christ through faith and baptism, with fulfillment in the body at the resurrection.⁶¹ Fourth, it confuses the perfect image of God given to humanity at creation with His continuing good gifts to fallen humanity in body, mind, and spirit, and to the fallen creation, so that humanity can consider the general rationality, righteousness and love of God reflected in the things that are seen, and ought to so order their lives, so that all are without excuse.⁶² Fifth, it overthrows God's orders of creation, in particular, regarding the father's headship in families and the male-only Office of the Holy Ministry in the church.⁶³ Sixth, it equivocates on the creative distinctions of male and female through ambiguous language that allows for honoring homosexual and transgender practices. Seventh and most critically, the LWF doctrine of the image of God is not anchored in the eternal Son of God, who is the express image of the Father, the *imago Dei*, whose righteousness is imputed to us, and whose image is renewed in us through faith alone.⁶⁴ The LWF errs on the *imago Dei* as it does on sin: It focuses on earth and the works of man, not on heaven and the works of God.

Theology of the Cross

The LWF's redefinition of *imago Dei* paves the way for a reframing of Luther's theology of the cross. The *Assembly Study Guide* rightly acknowledges Luther's distinction of the theology of glory from the theology of the cross, as found in his *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518).⁶⁵ Earthly power, riches and glory do not prove or convey divine blessing. As Luther says, "It is impossible for a person not be puffed up by his good works unless he has first been deflated and destroyed by suffering and evil until he knows that he is worthless and that his works are not his but God's."⁶⁶ In Luther's theology of the cross, God wounds, strikes and kills flesh in order to heal, raise and enliven faith. This is not a biblical hermeneutic, but pastoral care and personal meditation under the cross of Christ, who was

60 Gen. 5:1–3; SD I 10.

61 Col. 3: 10; 1 Cor. 15:20–28, 43–45.

62 Rom. 1:19–21.

63 See the discussion below on Pages 29–32.

64 Prov. 8:22–31; John 1:14; Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 8:6; 2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 1:22–23; Col. 1:15–18, 2:9, 10; Heb. 1:3.

65 Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518): vol. 31, pp. 35–70, in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: CPH, 1955–1976); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–1986); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: CPH, 2009–), hereafter AE.

66 Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), from Theological Thesis 21 proof, AE 31:53.

struck down for our sins and raised up for our justification. For Luther, “To be born anew, one must consequently first die and then be raised up with the Son of Man.”⁶⁷

But just here, the LWF takes an amazing turn. Instead of God striking the individual sinner so that he might repent and receive consolation in Christ crucified, the LWF announces that “the lived experience of suffering in the world” is the theology of the cross. For the LWF, the theology of the cross has a dual purpose. First, it “guards us from seeking any deeper or hidden spiritual or theological meaning of suffering.” But even more, the theology of the cross “unmasks the violence, injustice and brokenness that cause unjust suffering and frees us from self-sacrifice.”⁶⁸ It turns out that the LWF’s theology of the cross is a “churchly” manifesto to fight worldly injustice and suffering at every turn.

This reinterpretation of the cross drives the LWF’s understanding of the Incarnation. Assembly sermons, presentations and the *Assembly Study Guide* identify Christ as the Incarnate One sent by God to take on the vulnerabilities of the human body, to suffer bodily violence at the hands of the unjust power structures of His day, and yet to retain hope in God by the divine Spirit.⁶⁹ Thus, “the body of Christ was a site of violence. Rejected, excluded, despised, nailed to the cross.”⁷⁰ Summarizing Choan-Seng Song,

God identifies Godself in Jesus and his pain Jesus’ pain is identical with the pain of the people “crucified” by acts of violence. . . . This includes both natural suffering such as disease . . . and suffering that comes at the hands of human-caused injustices, including the effects of anthropogenic climate change.⁷¹

The high term frequency of “baptism” (44) in the *Assembly Study Guide* should be understood in this light. For the LWF, baptism integrates into Christ’s body of suffering, vulnerability and injustice.

Our primary location, through our baptism, is the church, the one body of Christ. Body also indicates *our participation*

67 Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), from Theological Thesis 24 proof, AE 31:55.

68 *Assembly Study Guide*, 17, 18, 18.

69 The *Assembly Study Guide* references resurrection (eight times in total—five regarding Christ, three regarding humanity and creation), but does not relate resurrection to the atonement, justification or soteriology. The resurrection becomes a generalized expression of divine love and cosmic reconciliation.

70 *Assembly Study Guide*, 11.

71 Choan-Seng Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1996), at *Assembly Study Guide*, 17.

*in social bodies and economies (and therefore political bodies as well). Body also points to our belonging to the earth as one community of life, rooted in creation.*⁷²

Accordingly, Christ's followers are baptized to go into the world to remediate suffering, vulnerability and injustice through peace and reconciliation, ecumenical and interfaith unity, and diversity and inclusion for all people, for all life forms, for the world.⁷³

Indeed, helping the poor and suffering *is* part of Christian vocation, but it *is not* the substance of Christian baptism. To omit baptism's benefits of forgiveness of sins, rescue from death and the devil, and eternal salvation in Christ, and to bypass baptism's daily significance of repenting of sin and living in righteousness, is to reveal an LWF agenda that reshapes Lutheran Christian theology into a liberal social program.⁷⁴

Misleading Theologies and False Narratives

Within the *Assembly Study Guide*, the term frequency of "misleading theologies," "false narratives" and related terms (18) is remarkable. In use, the terms generally appear to be code language for confessional Lutheran theology. This could be a sign that the LWF is concerned over defections to confessional Lutheranism. Without a doubt, these LWF warnings shape their catechesis regarding the LWF gospel of social justice and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI).

One may distinguish at least three loci of LWF condemnations regarding "misleading theologies" and "false narratives." First are those churches that teach that Scripture is verbally inspired and has an intended sense. For the LWF, churches that teach a single, authoritative version of truth do so based on a similarly flawed understanding of Scripture.

Scripture has been subjected to the tyranny of one narrative. In the field of biblical interpretation, academic research that had its roots in European universities, had for a long time a tendency to ignore the cultural, socio-economic, and political realities in which readers find themselves. In the 17th century, Lutheran Orthodoxy taught that each word of Scripture was inspired verbally.⁷⁵

⁷² *Assembly Study Guide*, 11, emphasis added.

⁷³ *Assembly Study Guide*, 50, 57.

⁷⁴ On the benefits and significance of baptism, see Martin Luther's Small Catechism (1529), "The Sacrament of Holy Baptism," SC IV 5–6, 11–12.

⁷⁵ *Assembly Study Guide*, 47.

For the LWF, a scriptural *sensus literalis* would shut down the theological enterprise of creative, contextualized meaning based on differing sociocultural norms. An inspired, inerrant, authoritative word would undercut a church's freedom to reshape, recontextualize and reprioritize that word. How may one respond? Sorry, LWF, but if God is an actual being—the Holy Trinity, with the Father eternally begetting His Son, the divine Word, as His express image, in the unity of the Spirit—then His revealed Word would be real, true, clear, instructive, profitable and authoritative in every respect for His church, even as Scripture testifies.⁷⁶

Second, the LWF condemns those theologies and narratives that teach church fellowship based on theological unity. The LWF labels this error “uniformity”:

Uniformity is the opposite of “reconciled diversity.” ... The human desire for ... religious ... uniformity excludes, oppresses and ultimately destroys. ... [Such] religious and spiritual systems dehumanize the dignity of human beings and destroy the life of all God's creation.⁷⁷

For the LWF, what is at stake here is their understanding of the gospel of social justice, diversity and inclusion, with fellowship practiced through “reconciled diversity.” As previously noted, the LWF holds to a gospel other than the historic Gospel of Christ's bloody atonement, and to a practice of fellowship other than that based on agreement in the doctrine of justification in all its articles.⁷⁸

Third, in its *Assembly Study Guide*, the LWF rejects as misleading and false the assertion that God has set enduring orders of creation and an unchangeable sex in a human body. This condemnation bears on three issues: (1) sexual identity and practice, (2) the at-home service of women, and (3) the ordination of women to the pastoral ministry. On the first issue, the *Assembly Study Guide* asserts, “Bodies share the gift and trust of sexuality that both create life and express love. ... [H]uman beings are capable of bearing and communicating the infinite love of God.”⁷⁹ This ambiguous language is as close as Assembly documents come to explicitly endorsing gender transition processes, alternative

76 2 Tim. 3:15–17.

77 *Assembly Study Guide*, 7. This critique is also broadly levied against all “unjust political, social, economic, religious and spiritual systems,” 11.

78 See above, “LWF Ninth Assembly, 1997,” 11–14, and “Gospel,” 23–25.

79 *Assembly Study Guide*, 19. Assembly materials soft-pedaled homosexual, bisexual and transgender advocacy through abstract speech.

sexual identity, and homosexual and bisexual practices. Such ambiguity—human sexuality as a trust that expresses God’s love to another—may succeed in quietly affirming diverse sexual identities and practices within the LWF, but it fails in conveying scriptural truth.⁸⁰ God created man and woman, each with a given sex, and created marriage as a lifelong union of a man and a woman with rich blessings. “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them,” and “What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”⁸¹

On the issue of the domestic service of women for husband, children and household, the LWF warns against “theologies . . . that limit women’s activities to the domestic sphere only. Often reference is made to the order of creation.”⁸² Misleading theologies encourage women “to sacrifice their lives and well-being.” “Patriarchal patterns continue to oppress and divide the human family, denying women both the right to live with dignity and freedom, and the ability to serve with their God-given gifts.”⁸³ How sad that the LWF jettisons the Christian doctrine of vocation, leaving off *any* praise to God for the high office of wife and mother, and then claims a false restriction to any other service if one honors this office. Such is the cost of placing sexual monadism and gender rights over the created orders and gifts of God.

The related issue of women’s ordination is the LWF’s *sine qua non*. From the forgoing, it should be clear that LWF church office eligibility is independent of sex. The *Assembly Study Guide* celebrates the fact that “more than 90 percent of LWF’s member churches now ordain women.” This belongs to the “inherent dignity of women,” supported by the LWF’s “Gender Justice and Women’s Empowerment work.”⁸⁴

More than a casual error of occupational qualification, the practice of women’s ordination—against Scripture, against Christ’s own institution of the pastoral office through the apostles, without precedent in the Christian church—raises the question of whether proponents can

80 See New Testament warnings at Matt. 5:27–28; Rom. 1:24, 26–27; 1 Cor. 6:9–10, 13–18; 1 Tim. 1:9–10.

81 Gen. 1:27; Matt. 19:6 ESV.

82 *Assembly Study Guide*, 12–13. No evidence or example is given in any Assembly document of a theology that limits women’s service to the domestic sphere only. This “straw woman” argument is unsupported in Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions.

83 *Assembly Study Guide*, 31.

84 *Assembly Study Guide*, 24.

be considered part of the “one holy Christian, apostolic church.”⁸⁵ The LWF may accept Augsburg Confession Article V on God’s instrumental power exercised through Word and Sacrament, but it violates Article XIV through women’s ordination, because a woman cannot be properly placed into the pastoral office. For confessional Lutherans, women’s ordination contradicts: (1) the enduring scriptural truth and goodness of the order of creation resident within the family and within Christ’s church; (2) the male-only Old Testament prophetic and priestly offices fulfilled in the Son of God incarnate; (3) the Son’s own male-only institution of His Office of the Holy Ministry through His ordination of the apostles; and (4) the Holy Spirit’s gift of the inspired, inerrant Word of God as the sole authority for the church’s doctrine and practice, which explicitly excludes women from the New Testament preaching office (1 COR. 14:34–35, 1 TIM. 2:11). This line of logic is unfolded in the

85 *Credo in . . . unam, sanctam, catholicam et apostolicam ecclesiam, Symbolum Nicaenum 1, 8, Trigl 30.* This question calls for thorough study. This is *not* a matter of deciding if true believers in Christ exist within LWF member church bodies. Undoubtedly, they do. C. F. W. Walther notes, “Also in heterodox and heretical churches (*Gemeinden*) there are children of God, and also there the true church (*Kirche*) is made manifest by the pure Word and the sacraments that still remain,” Thesis VIII.A, “Concerning the Church,” in *The Church and the Office of the Ministry (Kirche und Amt)*, Matthew C. Harrison, ed. (St. Louis: CPH, 2012). This position corresponds to AC VII 1, *Una sancta ecclesia perpetuo mansura sit, Trigl 47.* Christ creates believers wherever His Gospel and Sacraments are at work. The AC VII 1 use of *una sancta* reflects Luther’s soteriological focus on faith in Christ as constitutive of the invisible church, without reference to a visible *ecclesia* with marks; see F. E. Mayer, “The *Una Sancta* in Luther’s Theology,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 18, no. 11, article 67 (1947): 801–815, <https://scholar.cslu.edu/ctm/vol18/iss1/67>.

Nor is this a matter of rehearsing the Donatist controversy and applying the lesson. The Donatists confessed that, regarding the ministry of priests who, under severe persecution, had denied Christ, their subsequent sacramental acts were invalid. The church rightly condemned this position, because the efficaciousness of the preached Word and administered Sacraments does not rest on the moral integrity of the office holder, but on the Word. AC VIII 3 affirms this judgment.

Rather, the question of whether church bodies that practice, or advocate for, women’s ordination are part of the “one holy Christian, apostolic church” calls for thorough study of AC VII 2 regarding the unity of the church, and AC VIII 2 regarding the institution and command of Christ. AC VII 2 teaches, “For this is enough for the true unity of the Christian Church, that there the Gospel is preached unanimously according to a pure understanding and the Sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word,” (German), *Trigl 46*, my translation. A church body that confesses against the Gospel by ordaining women—against Christ’s authoritative teaching on the office of Word and Sacrament ministry—breaks the unity of the doctrine in all its articles (SD X 31). How can such a church body by its false confession and marks be said to be united with the “one holy Christian, apostolic church”?

AC VIII 2 pulls in the same direction: “Both the Sacraments and the Word are effectual by reason of the institution and commandment of Christ (*propter ordinationem et mandatum Christi*),” (Latin), *Trigl 46, 47.* As visible marks of the church, the Word and Sacraments rest on (1) Christ’s ordering and instituting these gifts for the church, and (2) empowering them by connection with His Word. Women’s ordination runs headlong into the problem of Christ’s authoritative institution of the office of Word and Sacrament ministry, for the Son called only men into His Office of the Holy Ministry through His choosing, blessing and sending of the apostles to perform the duties of public preaching, teaching, baptizing, exercising the keys and feeding the flock of God with His Supper. This line of thinking resurfaces in AC XIV’s *rite vocatus*. How can a church body that practices and confesses against the institution and command of Christ be said to be united with the “one holy Christian, apostolic church”?

recent slender volume, *Women's Ordination through the Lens of the Apostles' Creed*, published by the LCMS in 2023.⁸⁶

The Ongoing Reformation

The keynote speaker, Monsignor Professor Dr. Tomáš Halík, articulated the LWF's sense of the ongoing reformation so well that he not only received a standing ovation, but was proclaimed by the Assembly to be an honorary Lutheran! The LWF's ongoing reformation reflects a process church. It is a communion of union churches reconciled in their doctrinal diversity, but united in their solidarity with all humanity and created life. Ecumenical work engages all LWF church members, all church bodies (except for confessional Lutherans), the faithful found in other religions and those with no faith in God at all. Together they will grow empathy toward those who suffer under the unjust power structures of the day, with ever more action bringing in fuller social, political, gender, sexual, economic and ecological justice with attendant earthly peace and reconciliation. It is a great reformation of social gospel and DEI law, but it abandons the true Gospel of Jesus Christ and the enduring, good law of the Father.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know what is missing. Let LWF member churches take a step back from the precipice. One would do well to take seriously the fullness of Luther's *Small Catechism* (1529), beginning here:

I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.⁸⁷

For confessional Lutheran church bodies still inside the LWF, the

86 Jonathan E. Shaw, ed., *Women's Ordination through the Lens of the Apostles' Creed: A Fraternal Theological Dialogue of the Lutheran Church in Korea and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2023), <https://resources.lcms.org/reading-study/lcms-church-relations-booklet-womens-ordination-through-the-lens-of-the-apostles-creed/>.

87 Martin Luther, "The Creed: Second Article Meaning," *Luther's Small Catechism* (St. Louis: CPH, 2017), 17.

words of St. Paul apply: “Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.”⁸⁸

Thank you for your kind attention, and I look forward to our discussion.

⁸⁸ 2 Cor. 6:17–18 ESV.

APPENDIX

An Introduction and Evaluation of the Lutheran World Federation from the Theological Perspective of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

By the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations

Introduction: History, Vision, Projects

THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION (LWF) describes itself as “a global communion of churches in the Lutheran tradition on a common journey of renewal” that strives to put faith into action “within and beyond the communion” with the guidance of God’s Word and Spirit.¹

As of 2019, LWF member churches were about evenly divided between the global north and south.² According to its website, as of 2021, LWF membership included 148 Lutheran churches from 99 countries. These churches represent 77 million Christians.³ “Churches that wish to join the LWF must formally accept the Federation’s doctrinal basis as outlined in the LWF Constitution.”⁴ Member churches meet every six to seven years in an assembly. The Federation administration includes a president, seven vice-presidents and a finance chairperson. A council, with its elected General Secretary, governs the LWF between assemblies. In fiscal year 2019, the LWF had a budget of approximately 152 million euros with a revenue of 168 million euros.⁵

1 The Lutheran World Federation, “About the LWF,” accessed December 17, 2021, lutheranworld.org/content/about-lwf.

2 Kenneth G. Appold, “Is There a World Lutheranism? Accountability and Representation in Ecumenical Dialogue,” *Dialog* 58 (2019): 150.

3 “About the LWF.”

4 The Lutheran World Federation, “Member Churches,” accessed December 23, 2021, lutheranworld.org/content/member-churches. The LWF constitution states: “The Lutheran World Federation confesses the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the only source and norm of its doctrine, life and service. It sees in the three Ecumenical Creeds and in the Confessions of the Lutheran Church, especially in the unaltered Augsburg Confession and the Small Catechism of Martin Luther, a pure exposition of the Word of God.” lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2018/documents/lwf_constitution_en.pdf, accessed December 30, 2021.

5 lutheranworld.org/content/lwf-finances-2019, accessed May 2, 2022.

The Lutheran World Convention was founded in 1923, with the goal to “coordinate relief efforts after World War I and to promote fellowship and cooperation among Lutheran church bodies.”⁶ The convention met for the first time in Eisenach, Germany, with 160 delegates from 22 nations, who explored and expressed their unity of faith and spiritual kinship.⁷ At a meeting in 1929, the Lutheran World Convention stated its purpose: “In all its work of serving love the Lutheran World Convention and its committees shall, so far as the means are available, assist the needy and deserving Churches of the faith without respect to race, language, or political alignment.”⁸

In 1947, the Lutheran World Convention was reorganized as the Lutheran World Federation to help people in need, cooperate in mission efforts and theology, and respond to the challenge of the ecumenical movement. The 1947 LWF constitution stated, “The LWF shall be a free association of Lutheran churches. It shall have no power to legislate for the churches belonging to it or to interfere with their complete autonomy, but shall act as their agent in such matters as they assign to it.” The LWF did not, at that time, consider itself a “superchurch” that held authority over its member churches.⁹ A desire to provide help to those in need in Europe after World War II meant that the LWF was more concerned with practical matters than with ecclesiological studies.

In the decades to come, controversy arose over the nature of the LWF as an “association of churches” and the role it had in exercising church discipline among its members. This came to be called the “Great Debate” and is best characterized by German theologian Peter Brunner’s argument that the LWF was an “ecclesiological problem.”¹⁰ Brunner claimed that since the LWF agreed on the Gospel and the sacraments, it was a church according to Article 7¹¹ of the Augsburg Confession, but that if it chose not to discipline its members for theological error,

6 Albert B. Collver III, “A Brief Status of Worldwide Lutheranism at the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation,” *Logia* 27, no. 3 (2018): 6.

7 Gilbert A. Thiele, “The Lutheran World Federation,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 27 (1956): 445.

8 Thiele, 446.

9 Kjell Nordstokke, “The Ecclesiological Self-Understanding of the Lutheran World Federation: From ‘Free Association’ to ‘Communion of Churches,’” *The Ecumenical Review* 44 (1992): 481.

10 On this issue and its development, see Michael Root, “Affirming the Communion: Ecclesiological Reflection in the LWF,” in, *From Federation to Communion: The History of the Lutheran World Federation*, ed. Hens Holger Schjørring, Prasanna Kumari, and Norman A. Hjelm (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 216–46.

11 “It is enough for the true unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies instituted by human beings be alike everywhere” (AC VII 2–3; Kolb-Wengert, 43).

then it was not faithfully carrying out its responsibilities as a church.¹² Ultimately, this came to a head at the LWF general assembly in 1977, when the issue of apartheid was discussed in connection with the membership of white LWF churches in South Africa and Namibia. In 1984, the LWF constitution was amended to state that “the member churches ... understand themselves to be in pulpit and altar fellowship with each other.”¹³ Considering itself a communion rather than a federation, the 1984 LWF World Assembly claimed for itself the authority of church discipline and “suspended the membership of two South African Lutheran churches that practiced apartheid.”¹⁴ The earlier constitution had referred to the LWF as “a free association of Lutheran churches,” but in 1990, the constitution was amended to state: “The LWF is a communion of churches which confess the triune God, agree in the proclamation of the word of God and are united in pulpit and altar fellowship.”¹⁵ Because “the LWF defines itself as a ‘communion,’ all of the member churches are in communion with each other and are thereby linked sacramentally.”¹⁶

The LWF works toward the goal of Christian unity as they “engage with ecumenical and inter-faith partners.”¹⁷ The *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ)*, prepared by the LWF and the Roman Catholic Church, was an LWF ecumenical document. The *JDDJ* agreement was adopted at the LWF assembly in 1997 and signed in 1999. The LWF believed that this document expressed “a common understanding of our justification by God’s grace through faith in Christ.” The remaining differences in the doctrine of justification were no longer considered as “the occasion for doctrinal condemnations.”¹⁸

12 Peter Brunner, “The Lutheran World Federation as Ecclesiological Problem,” *Lutheran World* (1960): 237–56. See also Hermann Sasse: “Is [the LWF] in a position to call upon its member churches to again take the Lutheran Confessions seriously? If it can do this, then it has a great task, and we will happily help it in this regard. If it is not in the position to do this, or it will not do this, then the cooperation of any truly confessional churches is senseless.” Sasse, “Altar Fellowship, Church Fellowship, & Federation,” in *Letters to Lutheran Pastors, vol. 2: 1951–1956*, ed. and trans. Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2014), 201. Hermann Sasse (1895–1976), a German theologian who spent the last part of his career as a seminary professor, was an informed, careful and engaged observer of the LWF since its inception in 1947. Several of his essays address the theological assumptions articulated in the earlier years of the LWF’s history which would become foundational for the organization’s increasing distance from Lutheran doctrine. See “For Further Reading and Study” for a selection of these works.

13 Nordstokke, 485.

14 Collver, 8.

15 Nordstokke, 487.

16 Appold, 149.

17 The Lutheran World Federation, “Theology, Unity, Mission and Justice,” accessed December 24, 2021, lutheranworld.org/content/theology-unity-mission-and-justice.

18 Collver, 8.

The doctrinal direction of the LWF “has followed that of the secular progressive movement, particularly in social, moral, ethical, and justice issues.”¹⁹ The LWF has taken liberal, progressive positions concerning the role of women, gender issues, same-sex marriage, and environmental and social justice issues.²⁰ As the LWF has adjusted its interpretation of Scripture to align itself with these issues, the Federation has moved away from historic Lutheran doctrinal positions.²¹

According to its vision statement, the LWF is a “communion in Christ living and working together for a just, peaceful, and reconciled world.” Their core values include dignity, justice, compassion, commitment, respect for diversity, inclusion, participation, transparency and accountability.²² The LWF states that their values are rooted in God’s grace revealed in Jesus Christ and that they seek to promote dialogue “in order to build trust and peaceful coexistence among members of the world’s different faith communities.”²³

The first phase of an LWF study, “We Believe in the Holy Spirit: Global Perspectives on Lutheran Identity,” states: “Lutheran identity is rooted in the *solae* including the Word, the Trinitarian ecumenical creeds, Lutheran confessional documents (recognizing that some churches also recognize the Formula of Concord, Barmen Declaration, etc.) including the Catechisms with special emphasis here on the third article.”²⁴ The study continues: “Being Lutheran describes a faithful way of being in the world that points to Christ as the revelation of God’s love, while embracing the creative tension of ecumenical consensus, interfaith dialogue and interdisciplinary dialectic.”²⁵

The LWF addresses underlying causes of poverty and exclusion, working for a more equitable distribution of power, resources and

19 Collver, 7.

20 For instance, the LWF has developed theological studies and educational resources, such as “Gender: Herstories: Telling the Stories of Women Reformers,” “Transformative Masculinities,” “Loving Your Neighbor: Encouraging Constructive Interfaith Engagement,” “A Common Word: Buddhists and Christians Engage Structural Greed,” “The Church in the Public Space” and “God, Creation and Climate Change.”

21 “The Lutheran World Federation remains a federation in which the ‘family’ of Lutheran churches finds its expression. What keeps together the LWF and its member churches is not the common confession, but family resemblances, historical facts.” Herman Sasse, “Inclusive Lutheranism” in *The Lonely Way*, ed. and trans. Matthew C. Harrison (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 2: 344.

22 “About the LWF.”

23 The Lutheran World Federation, “Theological Studies,” accessed December 22, 2021, lutheranworld.org/content/theological-studies.

24 “Lutheran Identity Process Phase 1: Full Report and Lessons Learned,” The Lutheran World Federation, 2020, lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2021/documents/2020_dtmj_addis_ababa_lutheran_identity_consultation_a4_en.pdf.

25 “Lutheran Identity Process Phase 1.”

opportunities. They believe that differences in history and culture shape theological understandings, as well as perspectives on moral and ethical questions. They are committed to enabling “the full and equitable participation of women, men, people of all ages and people with disabilities.”²⁶ The LWF also offers “platforms for reflection and joint work on gender justice and women’s empowerment, eco-theology and what it means to be church in the public space.”²⁷

Since 1995, the LWF has engaged in a dialogue with its member churches concerning family, marriage and sexuality issues, including a process called the “Emmaus Conversation.” The LWF faces the challenge of differences of opinions among member churches about same-sex marriage and the ordination of women and homosexuals. In 2004, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania issued a statement, saying, “We object to legalization of same sex marriage . . . We do not agree with those seeking to ordain homosexuals into the ministry of Word and Sacrament.”²⁸ In contrast, the Church of Sweden stated that “the purpose of marriage is to support the mutual relationship between the spouses and provide a secure framework in which to bring up children. These needs also exist in relationships between people of the same sex.”²⁹

LWF efforts in gender justice focus on promoting human rights with an emphasis on women and girls and their full participation in church and society. The Federation’s 2013 Gender Justice Policy was prepared to help its member churches achieve gender equality through measures that promote justice and dignity. The document explains that gender justice “is expressed through equality and balanced power relations between women and men and the elimination of the institutional, cultural and interpersonal systems of privilege and oppression that sustain discrimination.”³⁰ The LWF has also produced webinars on transformative masculinity “to address the root of gender-based violence, to transform the intellectual and spiritual violence that shapes our ideas about what it means to be human and therefore our concepts of masculinity.”³¹

The LWF Action for Justice unit focuses on human rights, climate

26 The Lutheran World Federation, “Our Core Values,” accessed December 17, 2021, lutheranworld.org/content/our-core-values.

27 “Theology, Unity, Mission and Justice.”

28 Craig L. Nesson, “Three Theses on the Theological Discussion of Homosexuality in the Global Lutheran Communion,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 37, no. 3 (June 2010): 191.

29 Nesson, 192.

30 lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/DTPW-WICAS_Gender_Justice.pdf, accessed December 26, 2021.

31 lutheranworld.org/content/transformative-masculinities, accessed December 20, 2021.

justice, gender justice, and interfaith and peace-building. The Federation engages with national, regional and international human rights organizations and takes part in discussions with the United Nations Human Rights Council. The LWF also creates policy briefs concerning human rights issues in various countries.

The LWF seeks peace through conversation with religious leaders of various faiths and works with faith-based organizations. The Federation has also produced a number of publications concerning climate change, including “LWF Together Green and Just” (2012) and “Creation Not for Sale” (2017). The 2017 LWF assembly passed a Resolution on the Commercialization and Commodification of Creation to encourage member churches in their teaching on human dignity and their relationship to creation.

A Missouri Synod Evaluation

The LWF World Assembly in 1952 in Germany was the first to be attended by a president of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, along with other LCMS representatives. The LCMS president and representatives, as well as some free churches and churches in fellowship with the Missouri Synod, did not attend the LWF communion service held that year at a local church.

At its 1956 convention, the LCMS declined membership in the LWF “because the synod determined that [the LWF] was not in fact a federation, but a church requiring doctrinal agreement and church fellowship . . . The churchly character of the LWF as well as disagreements about the inspiration and inerrancy of Holy Scripture, about confessional subscription to the Lutheran Confessions, and the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ (among other things) prevented the Missouri Synod and many of the church bodies in fellowship with her from joining in the LWF”³² In this sense, the LCMS identified what it would take the Federation another 25 years to articulate: that the LWF was in essence a church.

The Missouri Synod did not sign the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, commenting in a 1999 report that “the foremost defect” of *JDDJ* was its acceptance of conflicting definitions of justification.

32 Collver, 7. Here also note Hermann Sasse, writing in 1959 on the lack of confessional consensus in the LWF: “It has become obvious and was frankly admitted that in very important doctrines, such as, for example, the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper, there exists no agreement between the Lutherans belonging to the LWF. The same is true of almost every doctrine of the Lutheran faith. There is no agreement on original sin, on justification, to say nothing of the doctrine of the inspiration and authority of the Holy Scripture.” Sasse, “The Crisis of Lutheranism,” in *Lonely Way*, 2: 269.

“For Lutherans, justification is essentially forensic, that is, God declares the sinner righteous on account of and in Christ. Roman Catholics define justification as an internal transformation of the believer, a ‘process,’ which Lutherans place in the area of sanctification, about which too there are different understandings.”³³

The 1965 document by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Theology of Fellowship*, addresses the issue of fellowship with other churches. Both unionism and separatism are viewed as equal dangers: “Unionism ignores genuine differences in doctrine, and treats them as though they were unimportant. ... Separatism ... sins against love and divides the church.”³⁴ Concerning cooperative work with other church bodies, the same document states: “Our Synod should clearly recognize that, in the case of necessary work on the local, national, or international level, where the faith and confession of the church are not compromised, and where it appears essential that the churches of various denominations should cooperate or at least not work at cross purposes, our churches ought to cooperate willingly to the extent that the Word of God and conscience will allow.”³⁵ At times, however, faith and confession may be compromised, as in association with the Lutheran World Federation, which calls itself a “communion” and considers its member churches to be “united in pulpit and altar fellowship.”³⁶

In his explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed, Martin Luther writes that through the Gospel, the Holy Spirit “calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.”³⁷ A 2009 document of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Church Relations in the 21st Century*, states: “In creating the church, the Holy Spirit works through external means. Thus Augsburg Confession Article 7 describes the true unity of the church as agreement ‘concerning the pure teaching of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments.’ It appends to the article the Apostle Paul’s description, ‘One faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all...’ (AC 7, 2–4). This clarifies *how* the Holy Spirit establishes and maintains the unity

33 Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in Confessional Lutheran Perspective* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1999), 17, files.lcms.org/dl/1/90BD9722-8E11-4DCF-96D3-869B579EC336.

34 Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Theology of Fellowship* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1965), 42, files.lcms.org/wl/?id=10uSqd1wJbkW41GpnQIFzCR8FXRBE8Z.

35 *Theology of Fellowship*, 43.

36 See footnote 12 in this document.

37 *Luther’s Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 17.

of the church: He does so through the word of Christ as it is rightly proclaimed and as it is authentically made visible in the sacraments.”³⁸

The *Church Relations* document continues: “The proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments cannot be separated from the entire body of doctrine any more than the head can be separated from a body and survive. Therefore church fellowship *coram mundo* [before the world] always flows out of unity in confession.”³⁹ The LCMS does not share a “unity of confession” with the Lutheran World Federation, therefore we cannot share pulpit and altar fellowship.

The LCMS also disagrees with the LWF in its support for the ordination of women as pastors. As of 2016, 119 out of 145 LWF member churches allow the ordination of women. The organization itself considers the opening of ordained ministry to women part of its “ongoing reformation.”⁴⁰ When the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia, an LWF member, voted in 2016 to restrict ordination to men, the LWF declared that it was “deeply saddened and concerned” by their decision.⁴¹ The Latvian church later joined the International Lutheran Council (ILC), which does not grant member status⁴² to churches that ordain women, and in response the LWF issued a statement expressing their dissatisfaction: “Membership criteria in the ILC subject churches to a set of theological principles, commitments, and practices, several of which ‘are at odds with what LWF member churches hold in common.’”⁴³ The LCMS has repeatedly and categorically committed itself to the teaching that Scripture reserves the office of pastor for men (1 COR. 14:34–35; 1 TIM. 2:11–12; 3:1–7; TITUS 1:5–9), and thus women may not be ordained as pastors or carry out the distinctive functions of the pastoral office.⁴⁴

The LCMS affirms that shared work in matters of physical need, or cooperation in externals, is possible even where disagreement in

38 Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Church Relations in the 21st Century* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2009), 3, files.lcms.org/dl/f/A6A26E11-5187-4795-8ED4-4F058316B534.

39 *Church Relations in the 21st Century*, 4.

40 lutheranworld.org/news/more-80-percent-lwf-churches-ordain-women, accessed May 2, 2022.

41 lutheranworld.org/news/deeply-saddened-by-latvian-church-decision-against-womens-ordination, accessed May 2, 2022.

42 The ILC, though not a “communion of churches” like the LWF, grants membership to participants that fall into three categories: 1. Members; 2. Associate Members; and 3. Others, including Observers, Recognized Organizations and Individuals. See ilc-online.org/about-us/membership/, accessed May 2, 2022.

43 lutheranworld.org/news/lwf-responds-decision-lutheran-church-latvia, accessed May 2, 2022.

44 The most recent LCMS affirmation of this came at its 2016 convention in the form of Resolution 5-14, “To Affirm the Biblical Teaching on Man and Woman in the Church.” See also Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Women in the Church: Scriptural Principles and Ecclesiastical Practice* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1985), 40–42, files.lcms.org/dl/f/6CE2573A-4E8F-4EC8-A2B0-098BD1747124.

doctrine exists.⁴⁵ However, the LWF's unbiblical position on certain social and ethical issues has made such cooperation untenable. LWF theological and political advocacy for LGBTQ+ causes runs in direct opposition to Holy Scripture. The Scriptures are patently clear that God created humans as man and woman (GEN. 1:27; 2:21-23); that He instituted marriage as an indissoluble bond between man and woman alone (MATT. 19:1-12; MARK 10:1-12; 1 COR. 7:10-11); that He prohibits sexual intercourse outside the bonds of marriage (EX. 20:14; DEUT. 5:18; NUM. 5:11-31; MATT. 5:27-30), including between persons of the same sex (LEV. 18:22, 24; 20:13; ROM. 1:26-27; 1 COR. 6:8; 1 TIM. 1:10; JUDE 7); and that heterosexual marriage and procreation is the foundation for all human societies (GEN. 1:28; EPH. 5-6; COL. 3-4; 1 PETER 2-3). As is the case with the ELCA, explicit support for gay marriage, gay clergy or the appropriateness of alternative sexual lifestyles is at odds with the biblical view and must be rejected on theological grounds, thereby making work together on certain social matters nearly impossible. A 2010 LCMS Task Force said this of the ELCA's views on homosexuality, and it applies even more strongly to the LWF's advocacy of LGBTQ+ lifestyles: "These cooperative activities, however, are threatened by the sexuality decisions of the ELCA because, in some cases, the ELCA's new affirmation of same-gender relationships may contradict understandings or goals that have enabled cooperative activities in the past."⁴⁶ Church bodies that disagree about homosexuality or gender identity, for instance, cannot possibly provide spiritual care to families in distress without confronting the possibility — or even the probability — of contradicting each other's firmly held beliefs on such fundamental, "first article" matters.

The Missouri Synod has expressed concern that some of its partner churches (in full pulpit and altar fellowship with the LCMS) retain their membership in the LWF. Details about this lack of confessional unity are expressed in Resolution 5-07, "To Clarify the Relationship between LCMS Partner Churches and the Lutheran World Federation," adopted by the Missouri Synod at its 2019 Convention:

WHEREAS, LWF is a proponent of women's ordination, acceptance of the LGBT lifestyle, and the use of a higher critical approach to interpreting Scripture; and

WHEREAS, The LWF defines itself as a global communion of

45 Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Principles for Cooperation in Externals with Theological Integrity* (2010 Res. 3-03) (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2010), files.lcms.org/dl/f/4C700277-664D-481A-B84A-2ECE2429562E.

46 Presidential Task Force, "Theological Implications of the 2009 ELCA Decisions" (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2010), 5, files.lcms.org/f/1B7F7596-E3ED-46CE-8A5C-A800B5E447E5.

churches united in pulpit and altar fellowship (although many of our partner churches in the LWF do not acknowledge this pulpit and altar fellowship); and

WHEREAS, Some partner churches of the LCMS are members of the LWF, and as partner churches we are in full altar and pulpit fellowship with them; and

WHEREAS, These partner churches have each joined the LWF at various times and have remained in the LWF for different and complex reasons; therefore be it

Resolved, That the Office of the President engage in fraternal dialogue with partner churches regarding this concern and compile accurate information from them on their existing relationship to the LWF; and be it further

Resolved, That the Office of the President report to the 2022 Synod convention with recommendations on addressing the relationship between partner churches and the LWF; and be it finally

Resolved, That the Synod in convention commend these partner churches for their commitment to the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions and exhort them to remain faithful in that confession.⁴⁷

The Commission hopes this brief review of the Lutheran World Federation will provide the President of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod with a helpful resource in advising our partner churches about the LWF and our concern over their joint membership with the LWF.

The Missouri Synod is not a member of the LWF. It holds membership in the International Lutheran Council. The ILC traces its roots to a series of meetings (beginning in 1952) initiated by leaders of confessional Lutheran churches, eventually becoming known as the “International Lutheran Theological Conference.” Its present name was adopted in 1993. While not a church body, nor requiring pulpit and altar fellowship among its members, the ILC currently includes 39 member churches worldwide, in addition to four associate members, 16 observers and two registered organizations. It serves to promote confessional Lutheranism through joint educational ventures, outreach programs, theological study and conferences for its leaders. It also conducts a Lutheran Leadership Development Program, offering a certificate to leaders of ILC-affiliated churches.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Resolution 5-07, “To Clarify the Relationship between LCMS Partner Churches and the Lutheran World Federation,” *2019 Convention Proceedings* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod), 152–53.

⁴⁸ More information on the ILC may be found at ilc-online.org.

Links and Websites

Lutheran World Federation
lutheranworld.org

Lutheran World Federation Constitution and Bylaws
lutheranworld.org/content/resource-lwf-constitution-and-bylaws

International Lutheran Council
ilc-online.org

For reports by the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations on justification, church relations, gender dysphoria, the stewardship of creation and other topics, see:
lcms.org/about/leadership/commission-on-theology-and-church-relations

For Further Reading and Study

Bloomquist, Karen. “Lutheran World Federation.” In *Encyclopedia of Martin Luther and the Reformation*. Vol. 1: A–L, edited by Mark A. Lamport, 476–78. Landam, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2017.

Johnson, Kathryn L. “Lutheran World Federation.” In *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions*, edited by Timothy J. Wengert et al., 462–65. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017.

Nelson, E. Clifford. *The Rise of World Lutheranism: An American Perspective*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982.

Sasse, Hermann. “Concerning the Unity of the Lutheran Church.” In *Letters to Lutheran Pastors, Vol. 2: 1951–1956*, edited and translated by Matthew C. Harrison, 117–36. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2014.

———. “From New Delhi to Helsinki: Lutheranism in the Chaos of the Ecumenical Movement.” In *Letters to Lutheran Pastors, Vol. 3: 1957–1969*, edited and translated by Matthew C. Harrison, 298–318. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015.

———. “Inclusive Lutheranism.” In *The Lonely Way, Vol. 2: 1941–1976*, edited and translated by Matthew C. Harrison, 341–45. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002.

———. “Open Letter to the Lund Meeting of the LWF 1947.” In *Letters to Lutheran Pastors, Vol. 3: 1957–1969*, edited and translated by Matthew C. Harrison, 521–28. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015.

Adopted by the CTCR
April 29, 2022



THE
LUTHERAN CHURCH
MISSOURI SYNOD