



LWF ELEVENTH ASSEMBLY  
STUDY MATERIALS

Day One

# Given by Grace



The Lutheran World Federation  
– A Communion of Churches



*The LWF Eleventh Assembly study material takes into account the regional focus of the meeting's worship life. Each of the six brochures includes a contribution from an LWF region on "Questions worth pondering" (p. 7); a hymn (p. 8), a feature story (p. 10) related to the assembly theme "Give Us Today Our Daily Bread," and information about some of the region's staple foods (p. 16).*

*This brochure is dedicated to the Nordic region.*

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– Premier jour : Donné par la grâce

Elfte LWB-Vollversammlung, Arbeitsmaterialien  
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## Bible Study One: Given By Grace

# The heavens are telling...

“What must we do?” That was the question posed to the Dutch theologian Hendrik Kraemer at a crucial time in Holland’s history when Christians found themselves on opposing sides on the battlefield. Kraemer is reported to have replied with these unforgettable words:

“I cannot tell you what you must do, but I can tell you who you are.”

With profound insight Kraemer had gone right to the heart of the matter. Our self-image—how we see ourselves in relation to others, in relation to God and in relation to the rest of the universe—will directly affect how we act in everyday life. This is particularly important when we find ourselves facing critical issues. So, we ask ourselves: Who do we think we are? The writer of Ps 8 wrestled with that very question, and came face to face with an amazing insight:

“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?

Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.

You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;

you have put all things under their feet . . .

Ps 8:3ff

The contemplation of God’s total creation reveals to us a sobering and yet an exhilarating truth: In the whole scheme of things we are as nothing, yet in the eyes of God we are precious beyond all description. In his Small Catechism Luther puts it succinctly:

“I believe that God has created me together with all that exists.

God has given me and still preserves my body and soul... all the necessities and nourishment for this body and life.

God protects me against all danger and shields and preserves me from all evil. And all this is done out of pure, fatherly and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all!"

*The Small Catechism, The First Article*

## **Creation as God's gift of grace (Genesis 1:1–2:25)**

Ever since ancient times, people all over the world have been telling their stories about the origin of the universe. These narratives are much more than theories about "how things came to be." They are confessions of faith—deeply held convictions regarding God, regarding the world and regarding the believer's place in relation to both. Those who know other such creation stories will find it instructive to share and compare them in order to discover how people of various faiths have understood themselves in relationship to their god and their world.

The Book of Genesis presents not just one, but two creation stories. In both accounts, God acts out of pure grace toward every creature, even before that creature comes into being. But the two stories also differ from one another in important details.

### ***The first creation story (Genesis 1:1–2:4a)***

The creation story in Genesis 1 reads like a poem of seven verses. It is a hymn that celebrates the good news that God created everything that exists. Beginning in a situation of chaos (1:1), the Creator proceeds to establish order and then to fill the space with planets and stars, the sea with fish and the earth with plants, birds, wild animals and livestock. All of this, God accomplishes effortlessly simply by speaking and "calling" for creatures to appear or to be brought forth.

Of special significance in this first creation story is the sevenfold divine affirmation that everything that God created was "good, very good." This story does not entertain a dualistic world view. God and the world are not opposed to one another. On the contrary, God appreciates, loves and blesses not only humanity (1:28), but also the animals (1:22) and even the earth (1:24f.). They all are invited to "bring forth" and so to become God's agents in the act of creation itself.

That is not to say, however, that all of creation stands on an equal footing before God. At the

obvious high point of the story, God decides to create humanity "in our image" (1:26), and so to establish an especially intimate relationship with humankind. God even entrusts to humans the divine prerogative of exercising responsibility for the care and welfare of every living thing (1:28b).

According to this story, all of creation is the object of God's love and protection, and humanity—the high point of creation—enjoys a position of responsibility and trust to reflect the divine purpose.

### ***The second creation story (Genesis 2:4b–25)***

The second creation story is focused almost exclusively on the human being, the *first* of God's creation (2:7). In these 22 verses, there are more references to humankind than there are to "the Lord God." By comparison, the animals receive only scant attention. The creation of sun, moon, stars, day or night is not mentioned at all. The entire narrative shows God preoccupied with finding ways to make the human being feel comfortable and cared for. To this end, the Creator personally plants a garden, makes trees grow in it (2:8), and transforms the dry land into an oasis by importing water via river channels and irrigation ditches (2:10–14).

God makes an abundance of trees grow, not just to provide humans with food, but also as a source of esthetic pleasure (2:9). The majestic and delicate beauty of plants and flowers (as well as the musical chirping of birds?) reminds humans that God's creation is intended to enrich life also through the enjoyment of the senses of sight and sound and smell and taste. All of this is done specifically for the benefit of the human being, whom God four times addresses directly as "you" with the invitation to eat freely from any tree in the garden (2:16). Only one note of caution (2:17): one tree is to be avoided. Consuming its fruit has mortal consequences. This is most likely to be interpreted not as a threat, but as an expression of tender care: God does not want the human to come to harm by eating poison.

### **People of the soil**

This story begins in a lifeless desert where no rain had yet fallen (2:5). God stoops down to work with soil. Like an artist shaping a lump of clay, so the Creator fashions a human form which becomes a living being when the divine breath from God's own mouth animates it.

According to the second creation narrative, humans are inextricably rooted in the

soil. Humankind originated out of the soil and is dependent on the soil for food. But more importantly, God created humans in the first place, because there was nobody to tend the land (2:5). To work the land and to “care for it” (2:15) will provide for humans an honorable vocation. Work, too, is a blessed gift from God. It brings personal satisfaction and gives purpose and meaning to human life. So work, too, was intended to be enjoyed. It becomes a chore only after, and as a result of, eating the poisonous fruit.

Humans are “soil persons.” That is not a “dirty” word. God’s clean earth (*adamah*) bequeaths its name to the person (*adam*) whose origin and destiny is so closely tied to it.

But humans are not only people of the soil. They are more. The animals were created from the soil as well, and the trees grow from that same soil, too. What makes humans into “living beings” (2:7) is the fact that God’s breath (*ruach*) animates them. In this narrative neither animals nor plants are ever called “living beings.” Only humans are dignified with this designation.

### **The comfort of companionship**

Yet the Creator thinks of still another way to benefit the newly created person. God recognizes that the solitary human being longs for companionship and needs a “corresponding” person (2:18) to overcome the feeling of isolation.

It is precisely at this (late) point in the second story that God decides to create the animals and to present them to the *adam* with the invitation to “name” them (2:19-20a). To “name” someone or something is to establish a relationship with the person or the thing named. Could it be that God intended that the animals should provide for *adam* some of that missing companionship? Indeed, humans and animals can enjoy a mutually supportive relationship. People whose daily life brings them into close contact with animals will readily confirm that this is so. But after naming the animals, the human being still felt unfulfilled. According to this story, the animals were not “living beings,” “corresponding” to the human being who had been animated by the breath of God.

So God set to work again, this time performing an operation on *adam*’s body, removing from it some tissue (*tsēla’* can mean “rib” or “side”). Out of this tissue God fashioned a “corresponding companion,” whom Adam (2:22) immediately “recognizes” as such and accordingly names *ishah* (the feminine form of *ish*).

The two persons are created to be equals in the fullest sense of the word. They are to be each others’ “helper” (*‘ezer* can mean “defender,” “ally,” or even “savior”). The two are to relate to each other not as an inferior assistant to a superior expert, but as teammates who “correspond” to each other. They will be each other’s “helpers,” in the sense that together they can lift and carry heavy burdens by taking hold of the object on opposite sides. They can be one another’s “savior” in the sense that each brings health and blessing to the other.

The two individuals are invited to be as one person, “one flesh.” We may regard this as an assurance that the deeply engrained desire of male and female for one another is a gift implanted by God, as well. The second creation story thus also gives appropriate dignity to the human mutual sexual attraction that can be enjoyed free of shame (2:24-25). This, too, is a precious gift of God’s grace.

### ***The world in which we live***

These two creation stories paint an idyllic picture of peace and tranquility. It presents life on earth as God intended it to be and, by the grace of God, will be. Unfortunately, every good thing can be perverted. Due to the hardness of the human heart, the good earth is being polluted, the water poisoned and the gifts of God are treated as commodities to be exploited. Intimate relationships are breaking down. The gap between rich and poor is widening steadily. A staggering number of children are starving to death every day. Where does one find hope for living in a world like this? For guidance we turn to another story, a parable of Jesus.

## **Restoration as God’s gift of grace (Luke 15:11-32)**

The so-called “Parable of the Prodigal” actually focuses not on the younger son, but on the compassionate parent whose two wayward sons are both in dire need of redemption. The story is so well known, one needs only sketch out its salient features.

In this narrative the younger of the two makes an utterly selfish request. He wants his father to hand over the value of that part of the family estate which will become his after the father’s death. By requesting the payout of one third of the family estate and walking off with it, the younger son imposes economic hardship on the family unit that has nurtured



© Marit Elisabeth Eira, Kautokeino

him. A gift that would have provided a healthy livelihood for himself and his community is now in danger of becoming the means for instant self-gratification.

Inexplicably, the father grants this wish and the son promptly converts the property into cash and leaves home for a far away country where he squanders everything and ends up as a starving swineherd in the employ of a Gentile. And once he has reached a state of desperation, the rebellious son has the gall to come begging for a job on the parental estate.

But wonder of wonders! It turns out that the grieving father has been scanning the horizon day after day, yearning for the child to come back. And when the young man's silhouette finally does appear in the distance, the parent, overcome by joy, runs to meet and embrace the child, smothering him with kisses before the humbled son even has a chance to deliver the rehearsed speech. The prodigal is not only accepted back, but gets restored to full privileges and becomes the guest of honor at a hastily prepared sumptuous banquet to celebrate the event.

Not surprisingly, the firstborn is not amused but resents the generosity extended to "that no-good son of yours." But the father overlooks the surly behavior of the firstborn too, addressing him in endearing terms ("my child") with a personal invitation to come and join the celebration of the happy event. "Your brother was dead—and is alive." The family can be together again. That—as far as the loving parent is concerned—is worth infinitely more than the value of one third of the family's material estate. The young man who had hoped for a menial "job," has his dignity restored by the gift of a magnificent outer garment. The wayward child who had violated the parental trust receives a signet ring as a reaffirmation of that trust.

Together, these stories sing praises to a gracious God who wants life to thrive. The God who created a magnificent world and entrusted it to those whom he had fashioned in his own image, is eager to come and restore what they have broken. God heals broken relationships, forgives committed offences, comforts the grieving, and gives daily bread to the hungry.

From the Nordic region

# Questions worth pondering

## *God, the giver of all good gifts*

As men and women we are made in God's image, redeemed by Christ and called to live in communion with God and each other. In today's world, how do we Lutherans witness to God, the giver of all good gifts?

## *The sacred gift*

Have we lost our sense of the sacredness of creation? If God is the giver (Ps 24:1), how can we accept farming or fishing policies that abuse the planet? How can we tolerate unhealthy food or see tons of food thrown away? How can we countenance a climate change that is chiefly caused by the West, but hits the poorest countries hardest?

## *The gift of life*

Why are we as a Christian fellowship not able to fight for the just sharing of safe and nutritious food by all? Is there anything in the Lutheran confession that "all human beings ... are born with sin" (CA II) that allows us to accept the status quo of injustice and lack of dignity for so many human beings? Do we believe that some of us have a greater God-given right to a full human life than people who do not believe in God's grace?

## *The gift of responsibility*

God has made us stewards of creation (Gen 1:26-28). How does this influence the way we care for our own health, the food we eat and the agriculture policy of our community? How can we show responsibility for national and international policies on food, land and water?



From Denmark

# Hymn

## Naden er din dagligdag

Grace is given day by day

Danish: Johannes Mollehave  
English: Per Harling

Music: Martin Emquist: Denmark

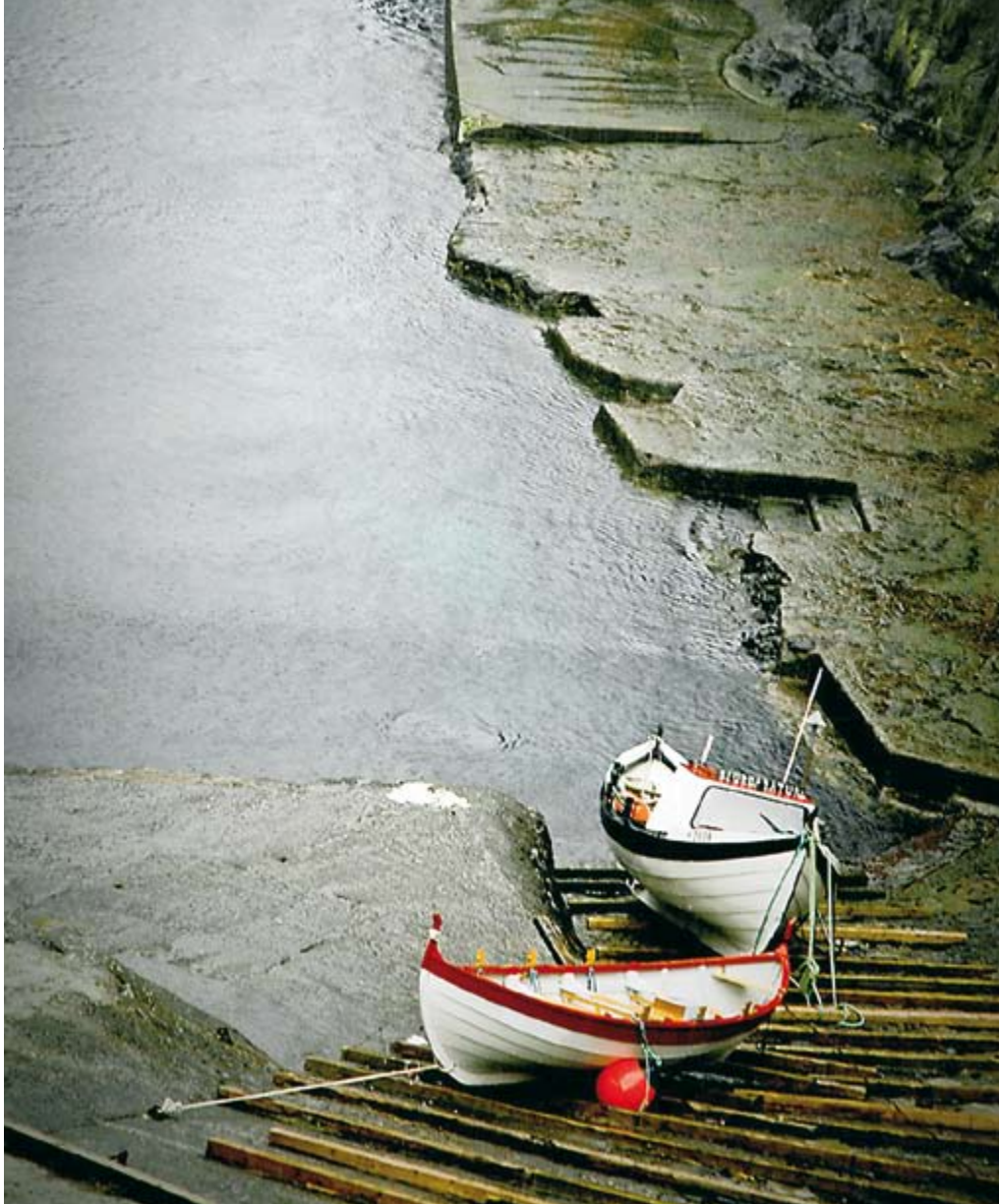
C F<sup>6</sup> G<sup>7</sup> C F G C

1. Nå - den er din dag - lig - dag, hver - dag - en, det næ - re.  
1. Grace is giv - en day by day, touch - ing, hear - ing, see - ing.  
2. Grace is no de - mand - ing love. Gen - er - ous - ly giv - en,  
3. Grace is the up - hold - ing word in our life's en - deav - our.  
4. Grace is giv - en grace to share in life's in - ter - ac - tion.  
5. With - out hope and with - out God death will be pre - vail - ing.

F G C Am Dm<sup>7</sup> G<sup>7</sup> C

Men - ne - sker at le - ve med, nå - den er: at væ - re.  
In the or - di - na - ry life, grace is sim - ply: be - ing.  
grace is know - ing that we are, con - stant - ly for - giv - en.  
Grace is there when all seems lost, grace is there for - ev - er.  
Grace is life that has its source in the re - sur - rec - tion.  
Faith, hope, love we on - ly find where the grace is dwell - ing.





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# Devotion

Our gracious God daily showers us with gifts too numerous to count. The most marvelous among these gifts are usually those which most of us have come to take for granted because they have become such a “normal” part of our daily activities. We discover the enormity of their true worth when, because of whatever circumstances, we must do without them for a short while or permanently. That may also be the reason why we hardly ever even think of these privileges when we give thanks to God. They are some of the most precious gifts there are—things that make life truly extraordinary.

- Seeing vibrant colors on flowers and trees
- Hearing uplifting music and meaningful words
- Touching exquisite textures and appealing features
- Moving hands and feet
- Feeling the warmth of an embrace
- Experiencing emotion, laughter and crying
- Cuddling a newborn child

- Receiving tokens of love
- Sharing feelings of compassion
- Remembering acts of kindness
- Forgetting past mistakes
- Receiving the assurance of forgiveness
- Tasting satisfying food
- Being refreshed by a drink of thirst-quenching water
- Maintaining one’s sense of dignity and self-respect
- Basking in gentle sunshine
- Breathing clean, fresh air
- Clinging to boundless hope

## Prayer

Thank you, gracious God, for satisfying your children’s deepest hungers. When we suffer want, enable us to cling to your promises. Make us ever mindful of our neighbors near and far, whose needs go unfulfilled.

Amen

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Feature

# Iceland: financial meltdown and moral recovery

His steps are heavy. A man in his forties, a contractor in the building industry who has been unemployed for months; he is out of work for the first time in his life. He has already tried everything to cope. “I never thought I would need to ask for help to feed my family,” he says.

Asking for help is a last resort for those who fall through the grid of social support in Iceland.

Since October 2008, the country has been ravaged by the global credit crisis. The currency collapsed. The economy contracted, with unemployment rising rapidly. The government was forced to take control of the three major banks and eventually to resign.

Requests for help to Icelandic Church Aid (ICA) have grown more than 300 percent. Most who come have never sought help before. Many break down.



*The economic collapse in Iceland has left many families trapped, unable to pay for necessities such as food, clothing and housing. © Árni Svanur Danielsson / Biskupsstofa*

“Unemployment is the biggest single factor,” says Vilborg Oddsdottir, a social worker at the ICA. “In April 2008 we had requests from four unemployed men. In March 2009 we had requests from 46 women and 213 men.”

Congregations and deaneries around the country have stepped up their contributions

to the ICA, as have the church authorities. Jonas Thorisson, director of the ICA, says that donations for domestic aid have never been higher. “But the need is increasing, both in the capital and around the country, where the pastors are our contacts for assistance.”

In Reykjavik, the Red Cross opened a center for the unemployed. Pastors and deacons volunteer every day and offer pastoral counseling. In other areas, congregations have opened centers.

Iceland had enjoyed years of rising incomes and high growth rates, thanks in no small part to a foreign debt that peaked at 10 times the annual national GDP. For just that reason, the country was hard hit by the global financial meltdown.

In the population of 320,000, the sense of insecurity, anger and disbelief is strong. As evidence surfaces of excessive risk taking and mismanagement by financial institutions, many question the moral foundations of the economic boom. Why was the nation so taken up with material success and financial gain?

Pastors see the change in the nation’s mood in increased church attendance, especially in Sunday schools and meetings for parents with young children. It is a time of sober reflection.

In a radio sermon encouraging the nation to look after those most affected, Karl Sigurbjornsson, the bishop of Iceland, said, “Now is the time to show care and support for each other and look to our best values. The funds we have in spiritual and moral treasures—care, love, faith and prayer—are strong and last when others fail.” Bishop Karl also stresses the importance of honoring commitments abroad, especially in development work.

While many families are hard hit, the crisis also brings out the best in many Icelanders who take up the bishop’s call, volunteering to work for aid organizations and making donations where they can.

Work, home, security—everything that was taken for granted is now a cause for gratitude and a grace to be shared.

The theme of the day

# The grace of God

On this first day of the Assembly we celebrate the grace of God—the God who created the magnificent universe and entrusted the earth into the care of human hands. We celebrate the goodness of God who continues to forgive when humans abuse their privileges and who gives them a new start in life. We sing God’s praises in worship, we plumb the depth of God’s love in the study of the Word, and now meet together as sisters and brothers in Christ to share our daily experiences in light of the Good News.

## Village Group 1: Good soil – Clean water

### The gift of clean water

#### *Getting our bearings*

What did you hear this morning? What spoke to you most meaningfully? What questions arose in your mind as you participated in the life of the community this morning?

- Please take a few minutes to summarize your experience.

#### *Clean water*

Water is indispensable for life as we know it. One can live for weeks or months without food, but without water, people die in a matter of days or hours.

- Take some time to talk about water in your community. Is it readily available? Does it come chiefly from rivers and creeks or from wells, or from rainwater catch pails? Do you get it from kitchen taps or iron pipes, or do you need to walk for long distances to get it? Is it drinkable? Is it free of harmful chemicals or debris?

The answers to these questions will vary widely, depending on the country which you call home. It is deeply disturbing, however, to discover in how many places on the earth there is a severe shortage of water that is fit for human consump-

tion. There are communities in Africa where children do not go to school because they are needed to help their mother carry potable water for their family over very large distances.

#### *Why the shortage?*

- Take some time to reflect on the cause of the water shortage in your area. Excessive use of water for agricultural irrigation? Changes in patterns of precipitation due to global warming? Pollution of rivers and streams? In Canada, too, farmers protest that the wells from which they get their water for their livestock are drying up due to the water-intensive operation of a potash fertilizer plant in the vicinity. What do you think? What needs to happen here? Will you change your answer to that question when you learn that potash fertilizer is becoming essential for growing rice in China and India, and that potash is a “cash crop” for Canada?

#### *How serious is the problem?*

It all depends. How serious is it in your geographical region? In some areas, water rights are being sold for enormous prices. In large areas people are increasingly switching to bottled water for human consumption and the price of bottled water has increased dramatically to the point where it has become a luxury that poor people cannot afford. Some countries, rich in water, restrict their sales to their “have not” neighbor. We are told that in the future, wars will be fought not over oil, but over water.

#### *Are there hopeful signs?*

- Take some time to talk about what measures are being taken or contemplated in your home country to ease the water shortage. Building of water catchments? Cleaning up rivers and streams? Many vegetable growers cover their plants with material that reduces water evaporation or they apply trickle watering to individual plant roots. LWF has established an enviable record of digging community wells for small towns and villages in Africa. Remember, however, that drawing excessive amounts of ground

water will eventually lower the ground water level drastically. Singapore has been remarkably successful in building and operating water desalination factories. The technology is, however, so energy intensive that only rich countries like Singapore can afford to make use of it. Maybe the development of cheaper and renewable sources of energy can make desalination a viable option for more widespread use.

What other opportunities for easing the water shortage can you see? Are these options being pursued somewhere? If not, why not? What are the next steps? Water is totally recyclable. Astronauts can live for months in a space station without replenishing their water supply.

**What does our faith say?**

☞ Think about this: What is the message of the gospel in a time like this? Do you agree that we should not be motivated by fear but by faith? Do you agree that Christian ethics—particularly Lutheran ethics—is not about gathering up all our strength to achieve some lofty goals, but about responding with gratitude to the goodness of a gracious God? Do you refrain from littering the beach because littering is a punishable offense, or because a clean beach is a joy to behold and delightful for children to frolic on?

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Phil 4:4-7.

**Village Group 2:  
Sowing**

**The gift of good seed**

**Getting our bearings**

What did you hear this morning? What spoke to you most meaningfully? What questions arose in your mind as you participated in the life of the community this morning?

☞ Please take a few minutes to summarize your experience.

**Good seed**

Seeding time is full of excitement. It is a time of miraculous new beginnings, a time full of expectation. A grain falls to the ground. It sprouts, grows into a stalk and it branches out to bear several ears full of grain. It all happens “automatically,” so it seems—the one who sows “does not know how” it happens (Mk 4:26-29). God saw to it that every plant has “its seed in it” and can pass on its life to countless generations. How mysterious! What joy to see it happen! What gifts!

☞ Take some time to talk about this. What exciting new beginnings are you dreaming about? Dreaming is a very important activity (cf. Joel 2:28-29). Are you dreaming of your homeland as a place where all live at peace with one another? Are you dreaming of a country that enjoys food security; a country that is able to grow enough food to nourish all its inhabitants?

Go ahead, dream! Dreams are powerful motivators. By the grace of God you will receive energy to pursue your dreams in earnest. Dr Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream” speech ignited the black liberation movement in America. Dreams can be like visions in which God allows us to get a glimpse of what is possible.

**Good sowing!**

Sowing is a response to God’s invitation to “tend” the land. Caring for plants and animals (and for humans too!) is a God-like thing to do. Many people have a special “knack” for stimulating seeds to grow and to mature. They have an almost intuitive sense of what makes living things thrive. When we say that they were “born with a green thumb,” we acknowledge that this ability to make things grow is a gift from God.

People who love the land know the difference between cultivating it and abusing it. Women and men who work with the soil and with animals, have an intimate relationship with nature. They are artists. Sculptors and wood carvers tell us that they let the rock and the stump of wood “tell” them what “it wants to be.” Then they gently chisel the rock and carve the wood and so “help” bring out what is “in it.” They work with the rock—not against it—just as true farming folks work with the land rather than against it. There are “born teachers” who do something similar with and for people.

We believe that all people are artists and that their artistry is a gift from God, distributed by the Spirit, as the Spirit wills. You are such a person! Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. Your life is *diakonia!*

**Sowing and risking**

To live is to take risk. Everyone who places seeds in the ground knows that. The chances of failure are enormous. Jesus’ parable about the sower (Mk 4:3-9) says it all. Drought, shallow soil, invasive weeds, marauding birds and voracious insects are a constant threat. It is a wonder that any plant can reach maturity under such conditions.

With people, the risks can be even greater. People can be forcefully deprived of the gifts God has intended for them. Women and men who work in the soil often discover that what should be a joy has become drudgery. Even when the harvest is good, they

can barely meet expenses. Some must take off-farm jobs to help finance their farming expenditures. Eventually they may stop farming altogether. Some—usually men—get so depressed that they commit suicide, leaving their now even worse-off family to fend for themselves. Fisher folk often must stand by helplessly while huge factory trawlers scrape the ocean floor clean of life. In some countries growers are forced to raise flowers for export when they could have cultivated nutritious produce to achieve food security at home. What is your experience?

➤ Would you tell your stories?

### *Signs of hope?*

So, how do you cope with such unpleasant (sometimes seemingly hopeless) realities? That parable of Jesus about the sower has something to say about that, too. Not every seed in that story grew, and some that did sprout, eventually shriveled or was choked by weeds. Not everything we begin turns out as we had envisioned. But that which did grow produced a marvelous harvest. That, too, is a gift from God. Can you see signs of hope in your part of the world? What are they? It often happens after a lengthy period of relentless suffering, people are beginning to say: “This is no way to live! There has got to be a better way! Let’s look for it, let’s work for it. Let’s pray, and let’s act!”

➤ Please talk about signs of hope you have observed.

### *The voice of faith*

Luther insisted that even if he were sure that the world would end tomorrow, he would plant an apple tree today. Sowing and planting are acts of faith. Even if chances of a rich harvest are slim, the faithful farmer is confident that nothing done in God’s name is in vain. We are not called to be successful, but to be faithful.

## Village Group 3: Growth – Harvest

### The gift of harvest

#### *Getting our bearings*

What did you hear this morning? What spoke to you most meaningfully? What questions arose in your mind as you participated in the life of the community this morning?

➤ Please take a few minutes to summarize your experience.

#### *The excitement of harvesting*

In biblical times, the harvest festival was the chief agricultural event of the year. It was a time for exuberant celebration (Ps 126:5,6; Deut 16:15), lasting seven days (Deut 16:15; Lev 23:39). All residents, including hired servants and slaves, were invited to join the celebrations and to rejoice, because harvest meant food and well-being for all. The festival celebrated the goodness of God in worship and with dancing, even when the particular harvest in question was rather poor. The choicest of the “first fruits” (Ex. 23:19; Lev 2:14) were to be brought to the temple, as a sign that all fruit is a gift from God and as a reminder that harvesting obligates the reapers to share the produce with others.

In modern times many customs have changed, while others remain fairly constant. At practically every place on the earth where people cultivate soil and plant seeds, harvest is the high point of every growing season. The harvest festival is on the calendar. There will be a celebration of harvest, even if the crop should turn out to be sparse.

➤ Take some time to talk about this: How is Harvest Day celebrated in your part of the world (both among Christians and non-Christians)? What do these customs say about

the faith convictions of the various cultural groups who practice them?

#### *Harvest time is labor intensive*

Depending on one’s location on the earth, harvest time may last anywhere from a few weeks to almost the entire year. In many areas of the world, something is almost always ready to be picked and consumed or preserved. There are early crops (such as barley) later crops (such as wheat) and very late harvests (such as grapes). Time is always short. Weather conditions are unreliable and ripe crops tend to deteriorate quickly.

Tending the land is a task entrusted by God and intended to be good, healthy, satisfying and purposeful. Workers are almost always in short supply at harvest time, and the days are usually hot, as was the case in New Testament times (see Mt 20:1-16).

In our own day, the sugar cane harvest is especially excruciating because of the extreme heat. On the prairies both women and men drive large tractors and combines and grain trucks until late in the evening. Yet, “people of the soil,” for whom growing things is “in their blood,” find the work immensely rewarding. Only a true farmer will know the satisfaction of looking over a finished field in the evening, dead tired, and yet happy about the “good day” they have had. This too, is a grace gift from God: meaningful work and the health and energy to perform it.

➤ Talk about this: What are you looking for in a “good” job?

#### *What about the others?*

Unfortunately, many, many people do not enjoy the privilege of a satisfying occupation. They have to do work that is excessively stressful and often abusive. Think of the migrant workers whose living conditions are often dismal; their family life is disrupted and their pay is too low to en-

able them to feed their growing family at home. Or think about the farmer who cannot afford good machinery and is therefore faced with multiple equipment breakdowns and the increased stress caused by loss of valuable time and the accumulation of unexpected expenses.

- Talk about this: What solutions can you suggest to help such people in their dilemma?

### *Signs of hope?*

Many growers are now “going back” to earlier and better ways of raising crops. They opt for diversified farming on a smaller scale and adopt organic practices that are more fuel efficient and avoid the expense of unnecessary chemicals. Some younger hopefuls are moving to the country again to escape the hustle and bustle and the air pollution in the large cities.

- Please talk about this: Can you identify other signs of hope?

### *The testimony of faith*

Borrowing from the much-quoted statement by Wilhelm Löhe, Mother Basilea Schlink declared: “My reward is that I may do this.”

## Village Group 4: Processing what is harvested

### **The gift of preparation**

#### *Getting our bearings*

What did you hear this morning? What spoke to you most meaningfully? What questions arose in your mind as you participated in the life of the community this morning?

- Please take a few minutes to summarize your experience.

### *Processing the gift*

Food for human consumption is not just a matter of quantity. It is desirable that such food also appeal to the senses of taste, smell and sight, and that it include variety in terms of texture and food group, including color.

Those who process food and cook meals play an important role in preparing the food in such a way as to meet at least minimum standards. Thank God for women and men who are skilled in making food tasty and attractive. They are able to make very simple ingredients taste delicious. A bowl of boiled rice and some dal (a curry-based light sauce) is well on the way to make a feast. A fish grilled over a fire with a sprig of an herb and a sprinkle of salt is a delicacy. Ordinary bread consists of flour and water mixed with a small amount of yeast. Can you smell the exquisite fragrance of freshly baked bread? Does it make your mouth water?

- Take some time to talk about this: What are some of your favorite foods? Who prepared them—and how? Are the recipes simple or elaborate? How does the food taste? Is it healthy food?

### *Good food under threat*

Access to food is becoming more and more restricted. The hungry of the world must often resort to consuming substances of little or no nutritious value. One hears terrible reports of what has been found in the stomachs of persons who have died of starvation: grass, a lump of indigestible cellulose.

Where food is available, the price is often beyond the means of the millions of persons who must subsist on the equivalent of less than two dollars per day.

The processing of foods itself can also become problematic. Because some produce has a rather (easily spoiled, perishable) short shelf life, it must be preserved by various means. Such a process

usually results in a decrease of nutritional value, especially if certain food additives have been introduced. Such additives often have no other purpose than to produce a desired color in the food and to add “bulk” and weight to the product. The shiny apple on the grocery shelf often has been made so by chemical preservatives. Also, the processing inevitably involves additional cost, especially if the food must be transported to the processor and back again from the processor to the consumer.

Much of the food available in stores and in fast food outlets has been over-processed. The addition of copious amounts of sugar, salt and fat can create health problems such as obesity and heart attacks. There simply is no substitute for good fresh unprocessed produce. How can one get access to it?

- Tell your stories: Is it possible for your community to maintain access to healthy food in adequate quantity? Are the consumers in your homeland sufficiently informed to distinguish between food of higher and lower nutritional value? What changes in the processing of food in your country are called for? How can you help bring about such changes?

### *Signs of hope?*

In many countries of the world there are clear signs of increased preference for simple, organic, fresh produce. Many households are again planting at least some of their own vegetables, either in pots or in small patches of unused soil. Others try, whenever possible, to purchase their groceries from small producers in their neighborhood. That practice is catching on even in countries where food is plentiful.

### *The voice of faith*

“I will place my dwelling in your midst, and I shall not abhor you.

And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be their slaves no more; I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect.” Lev 26:11-13

## Village Group 5: Breaking the bread – Sharing solidarity

### Breaking and sharing

#### *Getting our bearings*

What did you hear this morning? What spoke to you most meaningfully? What questions arose in your mind as you participated in the life of the community this morning?

➤ Please take a few minutes to summarize your experience.

#### *The gift of sharing*

The ability to share what has been given must itself be regarded as a special gift from God. It does not seem to come “naturally” for humans. The tendency to think of oneself first seems almost like an instinct of self-preservation.

The experience of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the assembled followers of Jesus, no doubt provided strong motivation for the fledgling church to try to think of the community before the individual. It was a courageous act when the Early Church was led to demonstrate their newly found trust in God through Jesus Christ by sharing their individual possessions.

It was no doubt an exhilarating experience to feel upheld by a community that cared for the needs of all and saw to it that “there was not a needy person among them” (Acts 4:34).

Maybe that was too good to last, since already in the next chapter Luke records how private interests started to reassert themselves in the case of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11).

➤ Talk about it: How strong is the sense of private ownership in your part of the world? Some of you may be familiar with societies where the idea of “private property” is either unknown or regarded as anti-social. How important is it that people (including women!) have control over their own property?

#### *Sharing as a challenge*

The parable of the foolish farmer whose field bore a bumper crop (Lk 12:16-21) seems to reflect common human tendencies. The first thought in the farmer’s mind was to build larger grain storage facilities, to store his huge crop there and to relax. He was sure that he had reserves stored up for many years and therefore had nothing to worry about. Of course, Jesus also encourages people not to worry about the future, but they are to do so not because of the reserves they have stored up, but because they (like the lilies of the field) trust God to provide continually.

And God does indeed provide from year to year and from day to day, but he entrusts the distribution of those provisions to people who do not always recognize their responsibility. They act as though the proceeds were “mine, all mine!”

➤ Talk about this, if you will: What do you think? Why is it

that in some countries where food is grown in abundance and allowed to go to waste, huge numbers of their citizens not only go hungry, but face starvation? Why does the food not get to where it is needed? What, do you think, needs to happen to remedy this dire situation?

#### *Sharing with dignity*

Sharing needs to be done sensitively. “Handouts” may be the last resort in critical situations, but in the long run they have proven unsatisfactory. They may feed the stomachs of the hungry, but damage their soul. Every person needs to feel that she can provide for herself, if only given the chance to do so. To be always on the receiving end when food is distributed can destroy a person’s dignity. God’s gifts of grace do not make the recipients feel worthless. Rather, they build self-respect and confidence and a feeling of being loved and appreciated.

➤ Think about it: How can the goods of the earth be distributed in such a way that recipients don’t come to think of themselves as second-class citizens, forever dependent on the graciousness and pity of those who are better off? What mechanisms are you familiar with that might prove helpful in other lands?

#### *The testimony of faith*

“My friends, you are a people in whom the Holy Spirit is at work. When anyone among you falls down, you will do your best to help him or her get up again. But you will do so gently, resisting the temptation to think of yourself as superior to the one who stumbled. It is Christ’s will that you all act responsibly by continuing to bear one another’s burdens,” (Gal 6:1-6, paraphrased).



## A staple food

# Fish

“She [the Finland Woman] put the fish into the kettle of soup, for they might as well eat it. She never wasted anything.”

(Hans Christian Andersen, *The Snow Queen*)

With Scandinavia’s extensive coastlines, fish is a major element in Nordic people’s diets. Rich in protein, omega-3s and antioxidants, fish such as herring, cod, mackerel, salmon and trout are served with boiled potatoes and root vegetables. The region also boasts a wealth of forest fruit such as lingonberries, cloudberries, wild strawberries and raspberries, and these are especially rich in vitamins and minerals.

Because winter ice and storms restricted the fishing season, Nordic people became adept in

preserving food. Salting, smoking, pickling and drying are still traditional techniques, intensifying flavors as they extend shelf life. In ancient Norse culture, fish symbolized adaptability, determination and the flow of life.

The Inuit live across the circumpolar region from northern Siberia to Greenland. Their diet is traditionally composed of marine mammals, mainly seals, fish, caribou (reindeer), gathered plants and small game and birds. Hunting and food-sharing form the core of Inuit society, and meals are communal. Sami groups, who live in the northern reaches of Scandinavia and western Russia, depend for their food on herding reindeer, fishing, gathering plants and hunting small game and birds. Colonized in the thirteenth century, the Samis’ diet has been influenced by northern European cooking patterns.