

Address by the LWF President
Eleventh Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation
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- (1) “First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the world.” (Romans 1:8 NRSV)
- (2) We begin this Eleventh Lutheran World Federation Assembly echoing Paul’s words of thanksgiving for your faith and your proclamation throughout the world. Let our voices be raised in prayers of praise and thanksgiving for the Holy Spirit’s work in and through the Lutheran World Federation.
- (3) It has been a great joy and privilege to serve as LWF President the past seven years. During this assembly, we will have the opportunity to express gratitude to Dr. Ishmael Noko for his exceptional leadership as LWF General Secretary. I have learned so much from Dr. Noko’s theological wisdom, his leading the LWF to a deeper expression of communion while remaining focused on our participation in God’s healing of the world.
- (4) I ask you to join me in thanking all who have served in leadership the past seven years—especially the LWF Council, Executive Committee and advisors, those who serve in the Secretariat in Geneva and those who serve the LWF throughout the world. For each of you and the 140 LWF member churches, I say thanks be to God.

1. A NEW CREATION IN CHRIST

- (5) In my report to you I have chosen to invite you into a conversation that will build upon Dr. Noko’s excellent report, “From Winnipeg to Stuttgart 2003-2010,” and prepare us to engage the theme of this assembly as it will be developed in the keynote address by his grace Archbishop Rowan Williams and addressed in worship, Bible studies, and village groups.
- (6) This conversation continues one in which we have been engaged over the past seven years. The Council has shaped the conversation and the renewal process has given it focus. The conversation is about our self-understanding as the Lutheran World Federation.
- (7) I am not suggesting that we turn inward, becoming preoccupied with our own identity and survival. Rather I believe our self-understanding is for the sake of being turned outward toward the world God so loves. In fact, I believe attentiveness to our self-understanding is not for our own sake, but for the sake of the Good News of Jesus Christ and for the sake of the life of the world.
- (8) What shall we say about our self-understanding as the Lutheran World Federation? Or more accurately, how do we reveal to one another and others who we are? Permit me to share my observations.

Evangelical

- (9) Our self-understanding as the LWF is inseparable from the clarity of our proclamation. Throughout the past seven years, I have asked repeatedly, “What gospel are we proclaiming?” It may seem an unnecessary question to some, but it is not, for there are competing gospels. Some attractively offer prosperity to those who live in poverty. There are gospels that say the way to salvation is through personal morality, acts of charity, political action, pious devotion, or right doctrine. Yet for us, it is from the gospel’s transformative proclamation of the new creation in Christ that our self-understanding comes. “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ.” (2 Corinthians 5:17-18 NRSV)
- (10) Did you hear that? Do you believe it? The new creation in Christ is not just patching up old differences and covering over old divisions, but then leaving intact the fundamental assumptions and systems of power and privilege that leave us trapped in these systems of domination and exploitation and alienation, trapped in a house of death.
- (11) The new creation is a completely new thing in Jesus Christ. It is the full dignity of our baptismal life in Christ. We are a liberated resurrection community, sent to bear witness in word and deed to the new creation in Christ.
- (12) Our self-understanding comes from the transformative proclamation of the gospel as Paul declared it. “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:19-20 NRSV)
- (13) The good news we proclaim and believe is that Jesus would rather die than be in the sin accounting business. It is this transformative and liberating gospel that echoes throughout the 140 LWF member churches. “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” (Galatians 5:1 NRSV) That is the good news we proclaim to those living enslaved by systems of domination and exploitation. It is the good news of Jesus Christ announced to those whose dignity has been stripped away and to those who live immobilized by fear and guilt.
- (14) In Christ you are bound to be free—free from the powers of sin, death and the devil. The new creation you are in Christ leads to a life of faith in which reconciliation is the work—the vocation—God’s mission in which we are engaged.
- (15) “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ.” (2 Corinthians 5:18-20 NRSV)

Sacramental

- (16) Our self-understanding as the Lutheran World Federation begins in and flows from our baptism into Christ, in whom God is making everything new. Joined to Christ and his death

and resurrection, through the means of grace—Word and water, bread and wine—we are joined to a community of radical inclusion.

- (17) “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:27-28 NRSV)
- (18) At the table of the Bread of Life, there is bread for all. Regardless of who people are and what they bring to the table, everyone receives the same gift—the body and blood of Christ—no more, no less.
- (19) The credibility and clarity of our proclamation has profound implications for our life together.

Where the Eucharist is “properly” practiced, Luther teaches, it creates a community of people engaged in public life on behalf of the common good, especially the good of the vulnerable. The communing community is “changed” into a people who attend to human needs. They “help the poor, put up with sinners, care for the sorrowing, suffer with the suffering, intercede for others, defend the truth.”¹

- (20) Yes, this is our self-understanding—given to us by God through Christ.

Contextual

- (21) But let us be even more specific. With this proclamation at the center of our self-understanding, it means there will be a particular social location to our vocation as the LWF. That social location was foundational to the LWF’s beginning as a response to those who had become refugees during the Second World War. Since our beginning as the LWF, we intentionally have stood with those who live on the margins of society.
- (22) In Bonhoeffer’s words, seeing “from below, from the perspective of the outcasts, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed and reviled, in short from the perspective of the suffering” is “an experience of incomparable value.”² Yes, our self-understanding calls to us to seeing and participating in the world from a particular perspective.
- (23) That particular social location to which we as the LWF are called varies throughout the world. In India, it means dedication to accompanying the Dalit people as they struggle for liberation in an oppressive caste system. For those living with HIV and AIDS, it means we

¹ Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Public Church for the Life of the World* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, 2004) 16-17. See Martin Luther, *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ, and the Brotherhoods* (1519), in *Luther’s Works, American Edition* (Philadelphia and St. Louis: Fortress and Concordia, 1955-86) 35:57.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison in Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010) 8:52.

will accompany their confrontation with systems of discrimination and marginalization that deny their human dignity and access to affordable treatment. It means standing with Palestinian Christians who seek to maintain a vibrant Arab Christianity in the midst of occupation. That location calls us to stand with indigenous people in their struggle for self-determination. It means walking with our brothers and sisters in Haiti for years to come as they travel the long road of rebuilding their nation. We will stand with women who confront patriarchal systems of power and privilege and who along with children resist human trafficking that recruits or coerces them into situations such as sexual slavery, forced labor, or child soldiery.

- (24) When civil wars destroy villages, leaving people to wander in search of safety, we will be present establishing camps for internally displaced persons. When the fighting stops, we will accompany people in the long process of reconciliation that begins by speaking the truth to the perpetrators of the violence—the truth of human suffering, death and destruction. From South Africa to Liberia to Sierra Leone, we have learned that reconciliation is inseparable from speaking the truth and from repentance.
- (25) Yes, during this very assembly, we will bear witness to this self-understanding by speaking the truth of the destructive attitudes and actions toward Anabaptists by Lutherans. We will repent and ask God and our Mennonite sisters and brothers for forgiveness. We look forward to a reconciled and renewed relationship in the unity of Christ's body.
- (26) Such an act of repentance and reconciliation is not a one-time event for us as the Lutheran World Federation. It belongs to and flows from our self-understanding as a new creation in Christ sent with a message and ministry of reconciliation. It will bring confrontation with forces that divide humanity, that deny dignity, that destroy God's creation. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote in *No Future Without Forgiveness*, "Forgiving and being reconciled are not about pretending things are other than they are. True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the pain, the degradation, the truth."³
- (27) Sisters and brothers, in our polarized world in which the divisive voices of religious extremists seem to dominate, let us as the Lutheran World Federation continue to engage in what just may be the most courageous of all prophetic acts—the act of reconciliation.

Communal

- (28) Being a new creation in Christ, sent with a message and ministry of reconciliation, will shape our life together in the communion of the LWF, as well as our proclamation and service in the world.
 - (29) In his greeting to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Dr. Ishmael Noko recalled the 1952 LWF Assembly under the theme "Christ Frees
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³ Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999) 270.

and Unites.” Following a world war and experiencing the tensions of the Cold War, relations between and among Lutherans were marked by suspicion. Dr. Noko reminded us that Lutherans were not even able to share the Lord’s Table with easiness. Dr. Noko said:

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

In light of that rediscovery, our forebears in faith decided to do the most sensible thing to do under those circumstances, and that is to stay together. They did not forsake one another. They did not anathematize each other. They understood that the Church is the body of Christ, a creature of the Gospel—and, therefore, not ours to dismember.⁴

- (30) Sisters and brothers of the Lutheran World Federation, we are called to live as *communio* because, most profoundly, living is communion. Christian faith and contemporary science agree that to be is to be in relationship and that to be alive is to be immersed in an amazing, complex, multidimensional web of relationships.
- (31) The revival of Trinitarian theology in the last decades reminds us that life *par excellence* is the life of the Trinity and not of some self-identical One alone with itself. To use Bishop Antje Jackelén’s image of a “dance” to describe a life most fundamentally real, life is first and foremost the dance of Trinitarian relations, communion in the strongest sense of the word.
- (32) *Communio* is a sheer gift, God’s action of radical grace. *Communio* is a lived event—being made a new creation in Christ, reconciled and given the message and ministry of reconciliation. Therefore, *communio* defines our self-understanding as the LWF and *communio* becomes our vocation, our way of life. In other words, *communio* has profound implications for how we are as the Lutheran World Federation and for what we do as the LWF.
- (33) Communion describes our relatedness to all of God’s creation. We hear the whole creation groaning in travail as life form after life form dies. Ultimately, the problem is not simply pollution of the water and air with resulting global warming. Rather, for us as Christians, it is the spiritual blasphemy of treating God’s good creation as something else—as an adversarial wilderness, a god-forsaken wasteland, a natural resources dump to be used for our own consumptive living and economic prosperity. It is blasphemous because by our conduct we are saying, “We will be our own gods. We will treat the planet as if there is no god who made

⁴ Ishmael Noko, Pre-Assembly Report, Section XI, Greeting from the Lutheran World Federation, August 22, 2009. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Office of the Secretary.

it, no god who declares it good, no god who reconciles it, no god who sustains it and who holds us responsible for its care.”

- (34) Over a decade ago, Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler said that from a Christian point of view, the ecological crisis presents us not simply with moral tasks, but requires of us a freshly renovated and fundamental theology. As the Lutheran World Federation, we are committed to that task with the LWF Department for Theology and Studies’ *Theological Responses to Climate Change* making a significant contribution.
- (35) In a recent posted letter to the ELCA following the ongoing BP petroleum spill in the Gulf of Mexico, I wrote that indignation and anger over neglect and carelessness that led to this disaster is understandable. However, to do so without recognizing the responsibility we all share—as consumers of petroleum products, as investors in an economy that makes intensive and insistent energy demands, and as citizens responsible for the care of creation—lacks credibility and integrity. An honest accounting of what happened (and what failed to happen) must include our own repentance.
- (36) Yet our witness is that God remains faithful in restoring the creation and human community. God has not abandoned the creation. The life-giving power of God’s creative goodness remains at work. The Spirit continues to “renew the face of the earth” (Psalm 104:30). The centrality of this proclamation shapes our response to the current environmental crisis. The cleansing water of baptism in Christ, who died not for the righteous, but for the unrighteous, brings forgiveness and reconciliation. In this reconciled life with God, we have the freedom to move beyond hostility and condemnation to give the powerful witness of a reconciled community that lives in service of the creation and our neighbor. This is a moment when the human community needs to hear not only our words of judgment, but also a word of true hope, for we have one to speak.

Diaconal

- (37) Communion is lived in God’s relationship with us, in our relationship with the creation, in our relationships with one another in the LWF, and in our relationship to our neighbor. As former DMD director Kjell Nordstokke emphasized, we have been called by one who is “among you as one who serves” into a communion that is a *koinonia* of *diakonia*, of reconciliation that reaches across every border and boundary to all the world. “To be in Christ implies being in his *XARIS*—in his work of love.”⁵
- (38) Communion as central to our self-understanding means that to be the Lutheran World Federation is to be engaged in *diakonia*. It is the work to which God calls us, the Holy Spirit empowers us, and for which Christ sets us free, “so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.” (2 Corinthians 5:15 NRSV)

⁵ Kjell Nordstokke, “The Theology of Diakonia,” a paper presented at the installation of Anders Wejryd as Archbishop of Uppsala, 2 September 2006, p. 8.

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- (39) It is through service, *diakonia*, that God continues to recreate and restore community in our midst. We have made clear that the basic directions of our diaconal work will be transformation, reconciliation, and empowerment. *Diakonia* is our response to the realities of our varied contexts—rebuilding communities after a natural disaster, providing health care and education, accompanying those who live in poverty as they seek daily bread, and working to challenge economic systems of illegitimate debt. As the General Secretary reports, “the active participation of local partner communities in LWF’s work adds greater credibility to subsequent advocacy work, which in turn makes the theological work more connected with real life, and its fruits of faith more visible.”⁶
- (40) Communion in Christ in a world of brokenness, sin and injustice is necessarily a life-giving way of the cross—a solidarity in suffering, a fellowship of resistance, a community of faith that loves and acts in hope for the world that God so loves.
- (41) So for us, the theology of the cross becomes most essential. As Yacob Tesfai has written, “Wherever there is suffering, there are found not only *the crucified people* but *the crucified Jesus* as well... In this understanding there is a unity and solidarity between Jesus and those who are suffering in their daily existence from unjust structures created by human beings. Their cries meld into those of Jesus. He and the suffering people are one; he is one of them.”⁷
- (42) This life-giving way of the cross opens out to endless tasks in every direction, down hard roads it would be easy to avoid. Yet it is radical freedom, springing from God’s amazing grace. It makes it possible for Christian community to be more than yet another mechanism of parochial or imperialist control. As a communion of the cross rather than glory we will be engaged in a persistent ministry of proclamation and reconciliation and healing without borders. Vitor Westhelle describes this reality in terms of adjacency: the event of the church standing “squarely in the in-between spaces—spaces where life is produced and reproduced—and the spaces of political life, of human communication, policy-framing and mores-forming activities ... The church is not an organic self-enclosed system but is open to the vicissitudes of communicative action and is shaped by them.”⁸

Ecumenical

- (43) Yet not on our own. To be the Lutheran World Federation: A Communion of Churches is to be ecumenical. When a radically inclusive communion is God’s gift to us in Christ and at the center of our self-understanding we will always define ourselves first in terms of our relatedness to others in the body of Christ. To quote Bonhoeffer, “We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ. What does this mean? It means, *first*, that a Christian needs

⁶ *From Winnipeg to Stuttgart, 2003-2010* (The Lutheran World Federation, 2009), p. 37.

⁷ Yacob Tesfai, “The Crucified People,” *The Scandal of a Crucified World*, ed. Yacob Tesfai (Maryknoll, New York; Orbis Books, 1994) 10-11.

⁸ Vitor Westhelle, *The Church Event: Call and Challenge of a Church Protestant* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010) 39, 44.

others for the sake of Jesus Christ. It means, *second*, that a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ. It means, *third*, that from eternity we have been chosen in Jesus Christ, accepted in time, and united for eternity.”⁹

- (44) May these years leading up to 2017 and the commemoration of 500 years of the ongoing Lutheran Reformation be a time not only for affirming the strong theological and confessional foundations we share as Lutherans, but for renewing a commitment that to be Lutheran is to be both evangelical and ecumenical.
- (45) As the LWF deepens its self-understanding as a communion of churches, it is also imperative that we are clear about how Christian World Communions will strengthen the unity of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. A vibrant World Council of Churches is a vital instrument of making visible that unity. The LWF’s role in supporting the first Global Christian Forum in Nairobi, Kenya, is a clear indication of our commitment to expanding expressions of our unity within the diversity we have as the body of Christ.
- (46) LWF member churches are living out Jesus’ prayer to the Father, “that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (John 17:23 NRSV). We gather with other Christians for prayer and Bible study, engage together in working for peace and justice, join with other churches and agencies to respond to hunger, homelessness, and natural disasters, and participate in Councils of Churches, ecumenical dialogues, full communion relationships.
- (47) Yet it is clear that sin deeply disrupts our communion with God, with Christians, and with each other. Both individually and corporately, we become—to use Luther’s language—*incurvatus in se*, curved in on ourselves.
- (48) Therefore, our new life in Christ is communion restored. But not only restored, for in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God initiates a more profoundly radical communion in which nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:39 NRSV)
- (49) Throughout this report I have been reminding us that, baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ, we are renewed our relationships with God and with each other and transformed. Such communion is not simply life but life abundant, overflowing; not only life but a life-giving dynamic, a Spirit-driven disturbance within and among us that puts us in motion, that sets us on the way in mission. It is communion as community that is *ecclesia*—a called-out people—every *incurvatus* turned inside out in a dance that moves to the neighbor.
- (50) That dynamic of communion is the undoing of every *incurvatus*. Therefore—to use the rich Brazilian term *convivência* (coexistence)—our confession can live in the movement of the

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together in Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996) 5:31.

Spirit only in ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue and praxis. In addressing the Lutheran-Muslim dialogue in Indonesia, Ingo Wulforst said, “*Diapaxis* focuses on the life and space we share in multifaith contexts and demands that people of different religious convictions develop a common vision of solidarity, respect, justice, and compassion. In *diapaxis* the other is no longer the ‘other,’ the alien, but becomes a friend, a companion struggling for peace and justice in *convivência* (coexistence).”¹⁰ May such *diapaxis* continue to be an expression of our self-understanding as a communion.

2. THREE SPECIFIC ISSUES: LEADERSHIP, DECISION-MAKING, AND SUSTAINABILITY

- (51) As I conclude these reflections, there are three specific issues we must address for they shape our life as a communion of churches: leadership, decision-making, and sustainability.

Leadership

- (52) When our self-understanding is that we are a radically inclusive and richly diverse communion, then leadership will reflect that diversity. We have made progress in our commitment to encourage member churches to support the ordination of women. Yet we have much work to do in holding one another accountable for that commitment.
- (53) A radically inclusive communion will challenge systems of privilege that perpetuate power on the basis of gender, race or class. A radically inclusive communion will do far better than we have done the past seven years in electing and appointing women to positions of leadership within the LWF and within member churches. A radically inclusive communion will see gender and generational justice as lived out in our own systems of leadership development as well as in society.
- (54) This radically inclusive communion will face the challenge of supporting churches in the South, developing accessible and contextual models of leadership development for their rapidly growing churches. Northern member churches can learn much about how important the training of lay evangelists and catechists is to the growth and renewal of the church. In future meetings with the leadership of the International Lutheran Council, let us pledge together to find ways to ensure that the formation of leaders does not become the occasion for calling into question the confessional integrity of either ILC or LWF member churches.

Decision-making

- (55) The renewal committee has helped us consider how decisions are made in the Lutheran World Federation. That important discussion must continue during this assembly and in coming years.
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¹⁰ Ingo Wulforst, “The Lutheran World Federation’s Study Programs on Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations,” occasional paper presented at the Lutheran Muslim dialogue in Indonesia (Geneva, Switzerland, April 2002) 7.

- (56) What decisions belong to the LWF Council and what are the responsibility of the General Secretary and Cabinet? What authority will regions have to shape priorities and programs for their context that at the same time reflect and support our self-understanding as a communion of churches? How do we hold in healthy tension respect for member churches making decisions that reflect their self-understanding regarding what it means to be faithful Lutherans engaged in mission in their context while also recognizing that decisions made by member churches have implications for the unity of the entire communion? When we face diminished financial resources, how will member churches be held accountable for their support of the LWF?

Sustainability

- (57) The issue of sustainability calls for an entire paper, a global consultation. It certainly belongs to the theme of this assembly, for when we pray “Give us today our daily bread,” we are praying for all that we need to sustain daily life—not simply our own lives, but also the life of the whole world and our vocations in it, for which we receive our daily bread. The ELCA social statement on economic life, *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All*, addresses this issue: “When we pray in the Lord’s Prayer, ‘Give us this day our daily bread,’ we place ourselves in tension with economic assumptions of our society. Rather than being self-sufficient, we need and depend on what God gives or provides through people, practices, and systems. ‘Daily bread’ is not earned by efforts of individuals alone, but is made possible through a variety of relationships and institutions.”¹¹
- (58) The LWF is engaged actively with member churches and partner agencies in working to develop sustainable communities that are committed to a sustainable environment. Such sustainable development is a continuing commitment that centers on empowering people to develop power and sustainable systems that overcome the forces and factors that oppress, dehumanize, exclude, and marginalize them. As a communion, we accompany one another in this process of self-determination that leads to improving the quality of life of people.
- (59) Our self-understanding as an inclusive communion informs how we understand sustainability. Interdependence will guide the path we take in sustaining the work of the LWF and support member churches. If we retreat from our trust in LWF leaders and staff to make decisions regarding priorities for the LWF and its member churches, we risk giving in, instead, to a pattern of member churches making decisions on the basis of their own priorities and resources. Instead, let our proclamation of God’s abundance inform our stewardship of resources. As a communion, let us together be “good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.” (1 Peter 4:10 NRSV)
- (60) As with previous LWF assemblies, we gather in Stuttgart when the world is in pain. Billions live in poverty in a world of great affluence and abundance. Wars rage, the creation groans
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¹¹ *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All* (Department for Studies of the Division for Church in Society: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, September 1999) 4.

under the weight of our consumption, refugees wander in search of shelter, illness and death come to those who lack access to clean water and health care. You bring to this assembly the cries of the people in your communities.

- (61) Yet we gather for this assembly in confident hope, for God has neither abandoned God's people nor forsaken God's creation. In diverse languages yet with one voice we are bold to declare, "Blessed by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." (1 Peter 1:3)
- (62) We gather in Stuttgart as more than fragments who momentarily put together the semblance of a whole. We gather because we are one by God's grace through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God's gift of unity will be experienced and expressed again and again in the midst of our varied diversity and even our differences. Life abundant is life lived in relationship with the Triune God, with God's creation and all of God's children.
- (63) From here we will be sent into the world God so loves and continues to reconcile. We will go in the power of the Holy Spirit and with the promise of the good news of Jesus Christ. Yes, we will leave just as we begin this assembly—in confident hope. Praise be to God.