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# The Lutheran World Federation: From Institution to Movement

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IN THE WAKE OF EVIAN THE AUTHOR ARGUES FOR THE CONTINUING VIABILITY OF the LWF, emphasizing new directions that it can pursue and de-emphasizing its structural rigidity.

If anyone has had doubts about the Lutheran World Federation as a living reality, he should dismiss them after the recent assembly. Some people even questioned whether this 25-year-old organization would survive the upheaval caused by the decision not to hold the assembly in Porto Alegre, Brazil; they feared the trauma would be fatal. One year later it is not yet possible to draw final conclusions. It is, however, certain that one should give a new, unbiased look at the whole situation before assessing it. Certain information on the fifth LWF assembly is necessary for such an objective evaluation.

The assembly is an event which takes place every six years; in this case the span since the last assembly was seven years. As the highest authority within the LWF, the assembly is composed of duly appointed representatives of the member churches. It is a legislative body which reviews past activities and sets the directives for the coming years. In fact, in this instance a special effort had been made to inform the delegates about various aspects of the federation's functioning. Open hearings gave them opportunity for further documentation and discussion. Findings were referred to the Policy and Reference Committee, which had the diffi-

cult task of preparing the resolutions for discussion. It is evident that the assembly at Evian emphasized new accents which need to be studied and eventually to become concrete in projects and activities.

An assembly has its own impetus as it concentrates on a special theme and meets under definite circumstances. It is interesting, but not necessarily conclusive, to compare the assembly at Evian (1970) to the one at Helsinki (1963). For one thing, the majority of the participants at Evian had not attended the former assembly. Those who were concerned about continuity did not intend to repeat the assembly at Helsinki but rather to build on it and develop its perspective. The leaders who prepared for Evian were of the opinion that the proceedings at Helsinki showed a definite consensus on Lutheran understanding concerning the "center" of the Gospel. It proved impossible, however, within the manifold tasks of an assembly to reach an agreement on how to express that consensus in a contemporary way. Federation leaders learned then to think in a more modest way about an assembly, perhaps also because the Roman Catholics were simultaneously working patiently, draft after draft, year after year, before asking their council fathers to give a final "placet." Furthermore, federation leaders



discovered in the course of the last decade that it had become more and more difficult for any church to vote approvingly on a doctrinal formulation unless it had been prepared sufficiently and opportunity had been given for comments and improvements. In planning a shorter assembly, the executive committee did not look for final statements. It did underestimate, however, the pressure which is inherent in such an exposed international gathering and which leads inevitably to recommendations and resolutions.

The impossibility of predicting the outcome of the assembly had been one concern. Nevertheless, certain advantages in that circumstance were also discerned. Wider involvement of all member churches is necessary, since there are far too few people who normally exert influence on the LWF through commissions and committees. The assembly provides a unique occasion to receive new stimuli and to hear the voices of people at the grass-roots level. Therefore the assembly at Evian included, besides the regular delegates, a large number of consultants and, for the first time, youth. It was important to hear the voice of the coming generation, which constitutes a large proportion of the LWF's constituencies.

The member churches of the LWF likewise see the importance of such an event. The mere fact that representatives of the various branches of Lutheranism are brought together obliges one to analyze his own church life in the light of others'. At a time when Christians are particularly challenged about how they live out their faith, it is of utmost importance that Lutherans discuss together their common beliefs within a national, secular, or religious

context. It is yet impossible to assess the enrichment that came out of the many dialogs or to estimate the blessings which flowed from the opening worship, the intercessions, the Bible studies, or the sharing of the Lord's Table.

In the context of many accusations directed today against "the establishment," one could assert that the LWF cannot be reduced to the level of a mere institution; it is rather an organization—or even better, a living organism. Institutions are necessary manifestations of the church, but they are not finally or essentially the church. Institutional forms can and must be adjusted where historical situations call for change. If they are not changed, they fossilize or ossify. Indeed, a great deal of discernment, prayer, and listening to the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit is required in these times!

One question has appeared again and again among the comments made about the 1970 assembly: Has the assembly at Evian changed the basic emphasis of the LWF or not? Perhaps the question could be rephrased as follows: In which direction is the LWF moving? The nature, scope, functions, and goals of the federation, as described in its constitution, have not been changed and are still fully valid. The Lutheran World Federation is a "free association of Lutheran Churches." Its main function is to be an instrument of united witness and common service before the world and for the churches. Some people have expressed a fear that the assembly at Evian represents a shift that could lead to a break with the Lutheran tradition, namely, that it yielded to modern theology by showing a greater concern for humanity than for God. Here again one has to be



careful not to make an absolute judgment. The choice of a central theme is to some extent arbitrary. At Evian particularly, the theme "Sent into the World" reflected the concerns of many people. It naturally led to underscoring the church's mission to the world and to man, and it created tensions concerning the understanding of the proclamatory role of the church and of its task within society that should be fruitful. The history of the LWF indicates that many of its activities have focused a Lutheran concern for human need and suffering throughout the world. The first assembly paid much attention to a disoriented, wounded generation that needed both the comforting word of forgiveness and the essentials for life.

The difference between 1947 and 1970 is, however, that theological understanding of the church's commitment to the world has undergone deep—and sometimes extreme—changes. It is significant that as a result of the assembly's experiences at Helsinki, the LWF Commission on Theology chose as its study theme "Humanity and the Lordship of Christ." The purpose was twofold: On the one hand, the LWF saw the necessity of analyzing the relationship between Christian ethics and humanity. Yet it wanted, on the other hand, to review the often misused doctrine of the two kingdoms. It finally looked into the relationship between Christian ethics and political as well as social orders, touching even on the difficult issue of revolution. The deliberations of the assembly show how imperative it was to address such concerns. Prof. Heinz Eduard Tödt's main lecture was an attempt to evaluate the present discussion on the basis of his own understanding. Under no circum-

stances was he presenting a position paper on behalf of the LWF. As had happened in Helsinki, opinions regarding how best to understand the present-day situation were quite divergent. Thus, when quoting Gerhard Gloege, who was one of the speakers at Helsinki, Tödt affirmed that we can no longer use Luther's question, "How do I find a merciful God?" as a starting point for modern man. Tödt's concern was to warn against false polarizations, as Thesis I, 1 of his lecture indicates:

In the face of the urgent co-responsibility for structuring the modern world there is the threat of a false polarization within the world-wide family of Christians. On the one hand, the dynamic commission of the Christian is understood in such a way that the church should allow itself to be dissolved and absorbed by society and by humanity-orientated revolutionary movements; on the other hand, concern for individual salvation and the self-preservation of the church are made central.

The passionate debate over basic issues of the Christian faith at Evian made the intervention and statement of Bishop Wölber of Hamburg appear rather acute. The West German National Committee of the LWF recently sponsored a follow-up conference and put this very debate at its center, with Professor Tödt and Bishop Wölber personally present. A number of points were clarified in that discussion. The different accents were apparent, but hopefully they were understood as complementary accents. Bishop Wölber thought that Professor Tödt's paper, with its justified concern for the church's role in society, did not concern itself enough with the importance of the individual.



Starting from the same premise of Luther's rediscovery of the Gospel message, Wölber concentrated on the responsibility of the individual within society and not on society's pathological aspects. Views similar to Wölber's have been espoused in Austria and Norway. On the other hand, other theologians express full support of Professor Tödt's perspective. An Orthodox observer-consultant, Prof. Nikos Nissiotis, has remarked:

If the Fourth Assembly in Helsinki concentrated on the reinterpretation of the doctrine of justification as one of the essentials of the gospel to be preached to the world, the Fifth Assembly in Evian tried to interpret the movement of carrying out this doctrine and of adapting it to the needs of our times. The main trend in Evian was, for me, the opening of a church family to the modern world and its needs.<sup>1</sup>

Such needs are indeed spiritual, and modern man despairs over making right decisions and over the right use of power. It is not unwarranted, however, to listen to the warning of those who fear that theologians, in their desire to understand the crisis of the world, accept too easily analyses given by sociologists. Nonetheless, such voices as that of the Christian sociologist Dietrich von Oppen should not be ignored. He begins his study entitled *Das personale Zeitalter* with the Gospel, which places the believer into a new relationship with the world and its life structures, that is, the family, the state, and authority. Such a dimension enables new forms of social life to be created.

<sup>1</sup> Nikos A. Nissiotis, "The Assembly in Ecumenical Perspective—An Orthodox View," *Lutheran World*, XVIII, 2 (1971), 123.

The basic question of how to approach the world with the Gospel found another focal point in the debate on "mission." Here, too, the assembly at Evian only reflected tensions existing within the churches. The assembly of the World Council of Churches at Uppsala had already indicated that real dissension on this issue existed, and many assumed that the LWF would experience similar dissension. The discussion initiated by the LWF Commission on Stewardship and Evangelism concerning the WCC study on the missionary structures of the congregation and its report "A Church for Others" had proved that the various Lutheran churches have their own opinions. As a result, it was felt that discussion could only be fruitful. It was a minor question that set fire to the debate. A new structure plan presented to the LWF assembly included a change of name from "Commission on World Mission" to "Commission on Church Cooperation." The arguments for the change were not theological but practical. The former commission dealt only with Africa and Asia; the new was to include also the European minority churches and Latin America. It was not to limit itself to some aspects of interchurch aid or internationalization of mission, but to assist the churches in whatever tasks were necessary. Those who pleaded for maintaining the word "mission" also had good arguments. There is no doubt that the whole ecumenical debate that was already under way affected the LWF assembly. Therefore, speakers quoted from the Wheaton Declaration of 1966 and made reference to documents from the Berlin World Congress on Evangelism of 1967 as well as the WCC assembly at Uppsala.



A few months prior to the assembly at Evian the so-called Frankfurt Declaration had also been published. It articulated the concern of many theologians that interest in evangelism has declined and that social-ethical concerns have been more or less substituted for evangelistic efforts. Some of the Asian and African delegates became rather confused by this debate. Who could ever think that the churches could lose interest in evangelistic opportunities! If there should indeed be "a replacement of their primary task," then one would have reason to be alarmed!

The assembly then approved a declaration on "The Role of the LWF in World Mission," which again should be seen as a sign of the life and dedication of world Lutheranism rather than as a compromise or a corrective. The declaration asks the LWF to continue to insure that "the Gospel be preached to all nations." This is a real encouragement to pursue the efforts to internationalize missions. Such internationalization has not always been easily accomplished because of strong individual or national approaches to the world mission.

For the last decade many Christians have been preoccupied with the question of church unity. Never before has disunity been recognized so much as a scandal. Therefore one of the main attempts of the LWF assembly at Evian was to afford opportunity for the churches to consult about their relationships with themselves and with other denominations. External circumstances brought the ecumenical context more into the foreground because of the change of the assembly site. The opening service in the local Roman Catholic church in Evian became a vivid

sign of the mutual desire to overcome the barriers of the past. At the same time it revealed the present limitations on that desire, for all of those present realized the suffering of the cardinal and the local bishop, who, in their own church building, could not participate in the Holy Communion because it was celebrated by Lutherans.

The previous assembly at Helsinki had opened the way to more intense ecumenical relations. By deciding to create the Lutheran Ecumenical Research Institute, since established in Strasbourg, France, the assembly indicated the seriousness with which it wanted to deal with this question. Never before had an entire section of an assembly been devoted to such issues. In this respect also the assembly at Evian wanted to go one step farther and to join theological reflection together with considerations about practical relationships. Hence, the term "ecumenical commitment" was chosen to describe this area of the assembly's concerns.

The relationship of the LWF with Rome has progressed considerably since the Federation was asked to send observers to Vatican II. The assembly at Evian underlined the reality of an existing dialog. For centuries we had talked *about* one another, but never *to* one another! The evening devoted to consideration of that relationship gave both the Lutherans (ALC President Kent Knutson) and the Roman Catholics (Cardinal Jan Willebrands) an occasion for expression. Cardinal Willebrands used the opportunity to say clearly that Rome no longer evaluates Martin Luther's work in a purely negative way. In fact, he expressed appreciation for the intentions of the Reformation movement.



Less spectacular but no less important was the actual work of Section II of the assembly. The Commission on Theology had prepared a document summarizing its position. Its title, "More than Church Unity," is significant and shows how much the question of church unity had developed since the Fourth Assembly. There are many facets to the unity problem, and it is impossible to hold them in isolation from each other. Inner Lutheran unity cannot be separated from the wider ecumenical fellowship. The increasing number of confessional dialogs must take into account that more and more Christians have lost hope that the churches will ever overcome the gaps which have been created as much by history as by theology. What is new in this document is the dimension that "Christian hope is directed to more than the redemption of the individual, to more than the unity of the church. It is universal hope, directed toward a world reconciled to God and to itself."<sup>2</sup> The discussion of ecumenical affairs in the assembly was both positive and fruitful, and the participation of ecumenical observer-consultants was most helpful.

Likewise important was the assembly's decision to extend ecumenical encounters with other denominations. The LWF's dialog with the Reformed churches has already reached the end of the first stage. As a result, the assembly voted to form a study committee that would cooperate more closely with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. The Lutheran-Anglican committee has met twice and is planning two more sessions. Similarly, consultations

with the various Orthodox churches are being prepared to compare the results of national encounters. Finally, the assembly asked the LWF to explore the possibility of extending dialog to Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals, and perhaps independent Christian movements in Africa and Latin America.

Section II, of course, was also concerned with Lutheran unity. Its report suggests that where there is no full fellowship yet among Lutheran churches one should look for "transitional forms or stages of fellowship." The assembly then recommended "to member churches and recognized congregations that they declare through their competent authorities that they are in pulpit and altar fellowship with all member churches."<sup>3</sup> This suggestion had already been voiced in Helsinki, but has now been directed more urgently to these churches. Reactions from most of them confirm this resolution in a strong positive way.

One of the Roman Catholic observers, Fr. August Hasler, remarked:

As a Catholic observer I followed the new ecumenical perspectives with special interest and would evaluate them as most significant. Yet I feel it would be wrong to regard this aspect as the dominant concern of Evian. What was new at this Assembly was, I think, rather a new stance toward the world. In deciding on the theme, "Sent into the World," the LWF made a clean break with the list of themes which had dealt with strictly theological and internal problems hitherto.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Sent into the World: Proceedings of the Fifth Assembly of the LWF* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1971), p. 89.

<sup>4</sup> August B. Hasler, "The Assembly in Ecumenical Perspective—A Catholic View," *Lutheran World*, XVIII, 2 (1971), 113.

<sup>2</sup> "More than Church Unity: Study Document for the Fifth Assembly," *Lutheran World*, XVII, 1 (1970), 49.



In the opinion of many people, no doubt, this break could have been less abrupt! One could list a number of precautions that might have been taken to avoid the unfortunate incidents that occurred in the process of deciding whether to hold the assembly at Porto Alegre or at Evian. Looking at it from a distance, one can realize that a deeper issue which was perhaps bound to appear anyway was at that time revealed. Here we do not mean merely the generation gap, which became quite evident at Evian. There is no reason to be ashamed of it or to try to cover it up, for the LWF assembly simply reflected the reality of its member churches. What became quite evident during the debate whether to meet in Brazil or not was that a great number of non-Lutherans were following with intense interest, because of the Lutheran image in the world and the so-called doctrine of the two kingdoms. It is significant that outside of Lutheranism, with the exception of the Roman Catholic archbishop of Porto Alegre, there were many who regarded the LWF's decision as a courageous act which, in spite of its internal consequences, showed a new theological understanding. It would be more correct to say that the change of the assembly site exposed a real tension within Lutheranism which must be analyzed thoroughly in order to see what it means for Lutheran fellowship. Because of the importance of Latin America for the future of the globe and for the announced assembly theme, all participants were requested to prepare for the assembly by becoming acquainted with the many problems of the South American continent. At that point information about increasing inhuman treatment and torture of prisoners

in Brazil became problematic for Lutheran Christians. Could they accept the hospitality of such a régime? Could they simply forget about it, separating the political realm (on the assumption that it was not their concern) from the spiritual (which presumably concerned them more)? Is not God the Lord of both, redemption and creation? Is not the law also His? It is significant that a majority of the delegates from Latin America, Africa, and Asia did not want to state the issue theologically in this way. Those who belonged to minority churches which could not survive without a positive rapport with their governments thought they were speaking from a practical point of view when they considered the decision taken by the LWF officers as wrong and as an insult to the host church. During the debate at Evian, however, it became evident that there is a real problem centering in the relation of the Christian man to political confrontations; in fact, the tension related finally to the understanding of Christian freedom. One group of participants not only wanted to correct a false interpretation of the doctrine of the two kingdoms, but also insisted that

faith is not the only motivation for or the basis of Christian freedom. For, unless one wants to limit oneself to positivistic and romantic conversations about the faith, it must be understood as the clear consciousness of this freedom.<sup>5</sup>

Another concern that emerged unexpectedly in the foreground of debates at Evian pertained to the possibilities and limits of fellowship within the LWF. Ten-

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<sup>5</sup> Trutz Rendtorff, "Why Evian?" *Lutheran World*, XVIII, 2 (1971), 109.



sions based on real issues are not to be avoided, but what do such confrontations mean when they affect not individuals but churches? Can one church or a fellowship of churches address itself critically to others? The answer is both yes and no! As members of the same family and as Christians those in the federation should be ready to listen to a brother if he wants to say something. But was it "mixing into internal affairs" when the assembly named Brazil specifically in its resolution on human rights? Was it "mixing into internal affairs" to ask that an LWF delegation visit the South African churches and speak with them about the difficult problems of apartheid? Yes and no!

Formerly the LWF assembly was looked at in a constitutional way as a legislative body determining LWF programs and as an opportunity for exchanges between Lutherans from all over the world. Evian

was more a "happening" than a classic assembly. Weaknesses were obvious, but signs of real life were more evident than ever. The LWF has proved to be a movement. Its tensions are evidence of authenticity, which involves taking real risks. Perhaps the greatest danger now is that such tensions could lead to polarization and mutual condemnations. The coming years will show whether or not Lutheran fellowship has reached enough maturity to live with diversities, and whether or not a common understanding of the Gospel is strong enough to correct existing weaknesses and errors for a better witness to our Lord and Savior. A witness is effective and authentic only if it is made within the context of the realities of the world in which men and women live as followers of Him who is Lord of both the church and the world and who sends His church into His world.

Geneva, Switzerland