



# Our worldwide church

PHOTODISC

By Heidi Ernst

Global  
contexts  
challenge  
Lutheran  
theology

**T**alk about a polar shift: Between 1988 and 2008, the number of Lutherans in Africa, Asia and Latin America much more than doubled, to 26.7 million, while Lutheran membership in Europe and North America declined by about 7 percent, to 41.8 million. Which means that now more than one out of every three Lutherans on the planet is from what's known as the Global South.

"We are a multicultural communion. In spite of distance, space and time, we are truly one," said Ishmael Noko, a pastor from Zimbabwe who since 1994 has served as general secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, which represents 68.5 million Lutherans in 79 countries. "The opportunity for sharing our life experiences on common bonds is remarkable."

The challenges in such an opportunity are great, given the different contexts in which these Lutherans live. While the ELCA will continue to grapple with its approval of a human sexuality statement, for instance, "some churches in the Global South ask why they now should have to talk about what churches in the Global North consider important when previously [the northern groups] haven't wanted to address concerns of those in the Global South," said Karen L. Bloomquist, an ELCA pastor who has directed the LWF Department for Theology and Studies for 10 years.

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A pressing question for some LWF member churches in Africa and Asia, she said, is how to address cultural beliefs about communicating with ancestors who have died. Still others worldwide face government oppression and worse because of their faith.

But what all share is that faith: confessing the triune God and seeing a pure explanation of God's word in the creeds and in documents such as the unaltered Augsburg Confession (the basic statement of the Lutheran Reformation) and Martin Luther's Small Catechism.

So although a five-centuries-old Reformation with a capital *R* helps define us, one way we continue to reform is through discussions by Lutheran theologians worldwide about how faith is confessed and lived out today in various contexts in the North, South, East and West.

### Challenging conversations

The LWF ([www.lutheranworld.org](http://www.lutheranworld.org)), based in Geneva, has held conversation-starting gatherings for theologians for half a century. But in the past two decades especially, those consultations have become more intentionally cross-contextual.

"Our challenge in the LWF is: how do we help shape and deal with questions in countries in the Global South, such as 'I need to go to the faith healer because I'm sick, but the Lutheran pastor doesn't quite know how to deal with us,' in a way that's consistent with basic Lutheran understandings of faith and practices of the church?" Bloomquist said.

"How do we become aware of all the different influences and pressures and hurdles that many churches in the Global South face? How do we as people in the West or Global North allow a space to hear that?"

In looking for answers, the pace of intentionally diverse conversations has stepped up dramatically in the past five years. Next month, for

instance, the LWF sixth annual course titled "The Ecumenical Church in a Globalized World" will assemble Lutheran seminarians from the ELCA and around the world in Geneva for two weeks of study.

The students from the Global South, Bloomquist said, ask "questions we in North America also need to be asking, such as how to live out the faith in interfaith contexts where Christians are a small minority, or where disease, poverty and death are pervasive. In a global communion, their questions also need to become our questions."

### 21st-century reforms

In March 2009 the LWF convened perhaps its largest and most diverse gathering of Lutheran theologians—one Bloomquist calls "really significant for Lutherans globally, but especially in the U.S., who often make assumptions about those elsewhere that may not be that valid or helpful."

The culmination of the LWF five-year Theology in the Life of the Church program, it gathered about 120 theologians from 30 countries (21 from the U.S.) in Augsburg, Germany, to discuss "how theology and practices are being transformed in light of the different assumptions and approaches present in one global confessional family" ([www.lutheranworld.org/what\\_we\\_do/dts/dts-tlc\\_augsburg.html](http://www.lutheranworld.org/what_we_do/dts/dts-tlc_augsburg.html)).

In her welcome at the event, Bloomquist made a case for continual theological evolution: "A 'Lutheran identity' cannot be based only on coded Lutheran formulas, or historical legacies brought by missions, or on the basis of ethnic or tribal identities, or historical accidents. Instead, sifting through, reconceiving and 'transfiguring' Lutheran theology is a dynamic movement."

Participants included scholars of disciplines ranging from systematic theology, the Bible and Luther studies

to worship, pastoral care and ethics.

Fidon Mwombeki, a native of Tanzania and now general secretary of the United Evangelical Mission, an ecumenical missionary communion among Africa, Asia and Germany, spoke about the "hermeneutic of resonance." That is, if your theology, no matter how good it is, doesn't actually touch the feelings and concerns of the people, it's not going to be effective—bad theologies that *do* tap into the people will.

Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon teaches Old Testament at Gurukul Lutheran Theological College in Chennai, India, and ministers to Dalit women, at the bottom of the nation's caste system. Her paper, "The Bible through the eyes and ears of the marginalized: Implications for the Lutheran communion," said this: "In our day-to-day work of theologizing, we hardly take seriously the concerns or the articulations of our partners from different contexts. If we can exist without them year after year, then there is no compelling reason why they should be taken seriously at all. But the church cannot pretend any longer to hide behind the facade of neutrality."

She later explained in an e-mail: "In order to be credible and make Christ visible, the Lutheran communion needs to transcend and reconcile diverse cultures, contexts and races, and identify itself with the outcasts, the tribals, the women and other weaker sections of society. Only then will it be able to give credibility to the gospel."

This month, Lutheran University Press ([www.lutheranupress.org](http://www.lutheranupress.org)) is expecting to publish two books encompassing many of the Augsburg papers: *Theological Practices that Matter* and *Transformative Perspectives*. They're fifth and sixth in a "Theology in the Life of the Church" series published in collaboration with the LWF. In 2008, Augsburg Fortress,



**Ishmael Noko (second from right) joins in worship at Arusha Town Lutheran Church, opening the June 2008 Council Meeting of the Lutheran World Federation in Tanzania. Noko is LWF general secretary. Bishop Munib Younan of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (right) is among the 170 who participated in the session that focused on the suffering of creation.**

Publishers released *The Future of Lutheranism in a Global Context*, a compilation of 13 essays that grew out of a similarly themed symposium at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minn., five years ago.

Clearly, today's worldwide Lutheran church more and more reflects the diverse faces and views alive in the 21st century. Some parts of the church are more conservative than others, there is a great disparity of resources, and people disagree on certain issues, said Barbara R. Rossing, professor of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

But, she added: "These disagreements don't have to be divisive. I think God can be reached in a variety of ways that don't have to be in conflict with one another. The diversity in the early church could be a model for us today to live in multiple contexts."

### **How reforming ideas spread**

Rossing is one of a dozen ELCA seminary professors who attended the Augsburg consultation last March. The ideas they take home from such

events get conveyed to students who then carry them to their congregational or other institutional calls, and to readers of subsequent publications. It's one of many ways that conversations among theologians worldwide continue to reform the Lutheran church.

Similarly, at ELCA seminaries, 14 full-time professors — out of 145 — are foreign-born and bring their country's context to the classroom. In the reverse, the ELCA Global Mission unit recently began a sabbatical program for professors and administrators at ELCA seminaries to teach or provide support at Lutheran or companion institutions abroad.

"We've always been a global church. Our Lutheran seminaries began with people who had been faculty in Europe," said Jonathan P. Strandjord, director for theological education with ELCA Vocation and Education.

"When somebody comes from outside your culture, they see things that are invisible to you in your own culture because you live with them all the time. They ask questions that can be both exciting and unsettling but always important for us to attend to: Why do we do things this way? Why don't we think about that?"

"Another primary reason that having people from other countries and cultures in seminary faculty is because globalization isn't just economic. There is an enormous movement of people going on right now, and many come to the U.S., so almost no one lives in a truly monocultural situation here."

The growing immigrant communities worshipping across the ELCA provide yet more dynamism to an evolving Lutheran theology. Or as Vitor Westhelle, a Brazil native of German heritage and professor of systematic theology at LSTC, said in his Augs-

burg presentation: "Lutheranism is migrating *en masse*, and the father of the German language is now speaking in many tongues. Luther's figure is being transfigured."

Indeed, at the heart of all the cross-contextual theological discussions is this: What does it mean to be Lutheran today?

Questions will continue to be asked, experiences offered. Noko of the LWF believes the next big idea — already begun — will be the Global South sharing insights about living in communion with one another and how we organize structures to promote that.

"This is a very difficult concept to understand, but there are people from the South who because of communal living have a language for it," Noko said.

"When we speak of the communion of churches, there is an accountability to one another, so that when you decide on matters of marriage, family, sexuality or another issue in the church, you should remember you're not standing alone."

How do we in the Global North — to return to a question posed by Bloomquist of the LWF — allow a space to become aware of our differences, of the influences and pressures and hurdles that many churches worldwide face, and think about our faith in light of that?

"By engaging and walking together," said Rafael Malpica Padilla, former bishop of the Caribbean Synod and now executive director of ELCA Global Mission. "[Then] those issues that are at the heart of the theological debate will come to the fore."

With a boost from the LWF and programs of the ELCA and other Lutheran churches worldwide, opportunities for walking together will continue and keep us on a path toward a true multicultural communion. □