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# Lutheran Communion Celebrating Gender Justice and Women Leadership in an Ongoing Reformation

Elaine Neuenfeldt<sup>1</sup>

*Caminante, son tus huellas  
el camino y nada más;  
Caminante, no hay camino,  
se hace camino al andar.*<sup>2</sup>  
– Antonio Machado

## Contextualized approach

**M**y narrative emerges from the paths where my feet are standing and walking and from the spaces and experiences of relationships with sisters and brothers around the global Lutheran Communion. These interactions are shaping and molding my knowledges. The Lutheran World Federation – LWF – is a Communion of 145 member churches, grounded in Lutheran faith, from all corners of the world. Working in this global communion I have learned that a multi perspective approach to faith and to religious experience cannot but be the way to be in communion. The Communion’s work on gender justice and women’s empowerment and leadership cannot be taken in a monolithic or uniform perspective. The ways and means of empowering women and struggling for gender just relations and structures in Brazil do not define what actions should be taken in Nigeria or Malaysia. Every context necessitates and has its own unique approach on gender justice. A contextual methodology is crucial to effective results and achievements on gender justice and women in leadership in the global Lutheran Communion.

A contextual perspective also helps to avoid the (sometimes hidden) assumption that notions of empowerment, gender justice and leadership are defined, not with a diverse experience and possibilities, but, based on experiences situated in the Global North and West. Thus far it has been from this geopolitics that power and leadership were normally defined, and the difficulty in unveiling this assumption is that it comes crystallized, in general, with notions of being “universal,” “scientific,” “academic,” and “objective.”

What is named as knowledge and how it is build is a political debate. I am situating myself in a circle of discussion that defines knowledges, in plural and with a clear intention of embedded transformation. I am referring to Boaventura Sousa Santos’ definition of “knowledges from the South,” where South is used not as a geographical point, but as a metaphor to name “human suffering caused by capitalism and colonialism at the global level, and a metaphor as well to the resistance to overcome or minimise such suffering. It is an anti-capitalistic, anti-imperialistic and anti-colonialistic metaphor.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Traveler, your footprints | are the only road, nothing else; | Traveler, there is no road, | you make your own path as you walk.

<sup>3</sup> Boaventura de Sousa Santos, “Public Sphere and Epistemologies of the South,” In. *Africa Development*, 37 no. 1 (2012), 51. <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ad/article/view/87540>.

Ivone Gebara says that the way we express our knowledge of the world is revealing our social and cultural location, which determines what we define as knowledge. Our production of knowledge is regulated and shaped by our social location. “The act of knowing is contextual. It is influenced by sex, place, time, and date, and also marked by ideological assumptions and sexist leanings.”<sup>4</sup>

In this sense, Gebara is proposing an “epistemology of the ordinary life” as a tool, methodology to read the world, the reality. An epistemology of ordinary life is defined as

a set of processes that interact inside each person with his or her surroundings, that drives him or her to eat bread instead of stones, to escape from fire, to feel the good aroma of coffee in the morning, or of the legume soup at the beginning of a cold evening, to rescue a child when crying, or to discover the child’s need even before she will start to babble, to seek help when in need, to fear sickness or death, to do things as if reproducing ancestral gestures.<sup>5</sup>

It is from these intersections that I understand knowledge, defined not just as theories, but more as emerging epistemologies that are grounded in social transformation of injustices. Knowledge here is intrinsically integrating experience, it is conceiving relationship, including feeling and thinking, time and space; it is collective organization of life and plays an important role in forming and molding what we define as knowledge/wisdom.<sup>6</sup> In Boaventura Sousa Santos words, it is a proposal to overcome the notion of “monoculture of knowledge” which is lineal, hierarchical and with the assumption to be global/universal – and to build a “ecology of knowledge’ – which is based on an utopia of inter-knowledge learning from other knowledges without forgetting one’s own... all practices of relations among human beings, as well as between human beings and nature, imply more than one form of knowledge, hence also ignorance.”<sup>7</sup>

## Contextualized knowledges and theological epistemologies

The Lutheran Communion around the world just commemorated 500 years of Reformation. It is relevant to approach this commemoration with a critical perspective that is questioning a unilateral, often, Eurocentric and western perspectives. The LWF Communion has member churches in each continent and there is a visible shift of the growing of the churches’ density in the South.

This presence and participation influences and interacts with theological understanding and concepts of the Lutheran identity of the churches belonging to the Communion. It is crucial, therefore, to develop a polycentric approach to the understanding of the Communion architecture. Granted that it was from Germany that Lutheranism grew, Europe, in general is no longer the bastion of Lutheranism, neither the only defining center of Lutheran identity. There are growing spaces around the Communion which are interacting with historical heritages (mostly from Europe or the USA) and building their own definition

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<sup>4</sup> Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 27.

<sup>5</sup> Ivone Gebara. As epistemologias teológicas e suas consequências. In. *Olhares do II Congresso Latino-Americano de Gênero e Religião. Epistemologia – Violência – Sexualidade*, Elaine Neuenfeldt, Karen Bergesh, Mara Parlow (São Leopoldo, EST/Sinodal), 33.

<sup>6</sup> Boaventura, *Public Sphere and Epistemologies of the South*, 51.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

and conceptual body of Lutheran identity. To affirm the diversity in the LWF Communion, Martin Junge relates “the polycentric nature of the LWF, which implies also the convergence of many theological narratives, which together make up for a global articulation of what it is to be churches in the tradition of Lutheran Reformation.”<sup>8</sup>

Interrelated with the notion of polycentric spaces is the notion of being a Communion, which binds member churches together in mutual accountability.

We are from many cultures, but every church in the LWF shares in common the Bible and the Augsburg Confession. From our theology of justification by faith, we share the values of equality, including intergenerational and gender justice. We are committed to ecumenical work and interfaith dialogue. We are committed to relief work and development, and our diaconal service continues in thirty-six countries. We are not all the same, but in these important ways we are more than a federation of independent churches – we are a communion of churches with pulpit and altar fellowship.<sup>9</sup>

From this biodiversity of theological knowledges in a polycentric Communion perspective I want to analyze critically one very important process which is the adoption of the LWF Gender Justice Policy.

### **The LWF Gender Justice Policy (GJP)<sup>10</sup> process**

The process of drafting and adopting the GJP was very participatory: In 2010, the Eleventh Assembly approved two resolutions: one on gender justice and a second on a standing resolution on inclusivity. At this Assembly the decision to develop a gender policy was also taken and requested the LWF Communion Office to develop the document. This Assembly drew a coherent line of a journey of decades of engagement for justice between men and women, which required the development of a gender justice policy as a next step. A Gender Advisory Group was constituted with experts from member churches as well as those in the LWF Communion Office. Regional processes and conferences discussed and enriched the draft of the policy.

The LWF Council (Colombia, 2012) requested the LWF Communion Office to present a draft document to the Council in 2013. The adoption of a gender justice policy by the governing bodies of the 2013 Council with the recommendation of contextualized plan of actions represented the intention to be pro-active and to move beyond plain good will, regarding the development of practical measures of gender justice in the Communion. The policy is grounded in Biblical and theological foundation, providing elements to deepen understanding of Lutheran identity in the field of gender reflections. It is following historical landmarks in LWF, where in decision making instances or programmatic work the commitments towards overcoming violence against women, or building mechanisms of women in leadership were affirmed.

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<sup>8</sup> Martin Junge, Opening presentation from the LWF General Secretary. Conference on Global Perspectives on the Reformation Interactions between Theology – Politics and Economics, 28 October – 1 November 2015, Windhoek – Namibia. [https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/opening\\_presentation\\_junge.pdf](https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/opening_presentation_junge.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Munib Younan, “Reflections on Reformation today.” In *Reformation: a Global Perspective*, eds. Marie-Theres Wacker, Felix Wilfred, and Andre Torres Queiruga (London: SCM Press, 2017), 84.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.lutheranworld.org/content/resource-lwf-gender-justice-policy>

The GJP is a practical tool to address structural challenges ensuring the implementation of the quota system, and moving forwards creating mechanisms that are leading to full participation. The document develops intentional mechanisms of regional implementation and contextualization that are providing the legal framework to work on a clear action plan, developing contextualized processes and guidelines to put the gender justice in practice in all levels of the Communion.

### Harvesting tool of the GJP

After three years of adoption and taking the opportunity of the reformation celebrations at the Twelfth Assembly in Namibia, the LWF decided to assess the reception of the GJP at the regional level, as well as local church level. Therefore, a simple survey, with few questions was conducted across the member churches, focusing basically on the women networks, as main agents of implementation so far. Following are some of the results and discoveries of this survey, together with some experiences documented over the three years of its implementation.

The harvesting tool outlines the mechanisms adopted by various member churches in evaluating the GJP. It also presents the impressions of the member churches on: a) the importance of the GJP, b) the changes it brings, and c) challenges and new fields or opportunities in the years to come.

### The importance of the GJP and the current use in member churches

Reflecting the diversity of the Communion member churches, the churches adopted different means of evaluating the GJP and engaging with it. The document has been translated into several languages (more than twenty-five) and study groups were organized, among women, local church leaders, decision makers and advocates of gender equality from inside the churches of related agencies and organizations. These studies happened in all regions of the Communion. Three examples show the diversity of approaches. The document has been part of a series of study and reflection processes at the 'ELCA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America) Women and Justice: One in Christ' task force meetings.<sup>11</sup> The women's summer retreats of the Korean Lutheran church had a session studying the document and the Jeypore Evangelical Lutheran Church, (JELC) from India introduced the discussion on gender justice using the document in women's retreat.

The GJP has also provided impetus for theological reflection and action. The 2016 Assembly of the JELC made an appeal for the church to embrace the principles of gender justice as a means of equity and empowerment of the church. A working group in Germany produced a handout with steps for contextualized actions in the churches. The handbook draws upon some of the main issues of the GJP and has been widely recognized as an important tool to facilitate further reflection on empowerment and inclusion.<sup>12</sup>

The GJP is widely seen as offering resources to both critically analyze the existing patterns and structures of the churches as well as build capacity at various levels. Church leaders, women and men, from the North and from the South, expressed that the GJP is

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<sup>11</sup> A version of the draft can be accessed at <http://www.elca.org/womenandjustice>

<sup>12</sup> The document has the following title, in German: "*Auf dem Weg zu einer inklusiven Gemeinschaft- eine Handreichung zur Geschlechtergerechtigkeit für Leitungsverantwortliche in der Kirche, Bildungsträger und Wahlgremien.*"

paving a unique way for strengthening women's leadership in various capacities, as well as enabling church leadership to prioritize the thriving of women and girls in their decision making.

In meetings involving both men and women the Japan Lutheran Church acknowledged that awareness of the GJP is a first step towards transformation in the Japanese context. In South Korea the GJP is seen as a tool which has triggered discussions on women's rights and the condition of women. The women's network in Germany perceives the GJP as a tool to enhance the visibility of the LWF among the member churches, and thus within the communion by engaging the GJP the work of the LWF has gained prominence. Gender justice is now freshly discussed in many gender mixed and women groups.

### **What changes does the policy provoke?**

The GJP as it has been observed thus far has the potential to create a global platform, a common global approach, by member churches (LWF Council) to discuss gender justice across the communion. The document creates a common language. Another important change is that with actively discussing gender justice, the use of the GJP has promoted the motivation and mobilization of women in leadership.

A significant increase in number of women undertaking post-graduate studies has been another concrete change that was pointed by one member church. This increase was not only attributed to the discussion of the document by national church leadership, but it helped to create a sense of responsibility and action regarding women theologians. The document also helped in reflecting the need for rethinking theological issues and themes, by way of which men and women can be strategic partners in gender justice. The need for a theology that redefines masculinities and facilitates critical awareness of how theology and scriptural interpretation can support male privilege is recognized as an important condition for implementing the GJP effectively.

One concrete experience in change is in Evangelical Lutheran Church in Zimbabwe (ELCZ). Several measures were taken after the document was discussed among groups and leadership and combined with a strategic approach on gender justice as part of the church activity and structure. A Gender Justice Desk was adopted, with the task to coordinate and motivate the process.

The ELCZ sees capacity building as crucial with a particular emphasis on targeting young people. Further, they also see the need for cross cultural exposure of staff as crucial for helping staff incorporate new ideas and inspirations from other contexts. The recognition that it is important to carefully monitor and evaluate their projects from a gender perspective taking into consideration contextual challenges and realities on a firsthand basis is part of the strategy of implementing gender justice. Several gender awareness-training workshops for pastors and bishops were held in dioceses since the adoption of the LWF Gender Justice Policy. The ELCZ has also opposed violence against women through Bible studies and at church meetings. The GJP, as a whole, has helped guide and direct the ELCZ in promoting the participation of women and equality.

Yet another concrete change in the church agenda was the engagement in getting to know the context and being exposed to the phenomenon of early and forced marriages both in the Church and community. With the church taking up advocacy in that area, victims of domestic violence both male and female are now able to speak out and seek assistance.

Another documented experience is from The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. The GJP was translated and applauded at an event where Minister Elisabeth Rehn – the first female minister of defense and Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations – was the keynote speaker. The document has been discussed at the church's offices for employment issues. In every dioceses of the church, the officer responsible for international and ecumenical relations has actively engaged the document. The GJP has also been discussed in the informal meetings of a network of women with PhD's in theology as well as with ecumenical partners.<sup>13</sup>

The GJP brought about some timely changes in The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land (ELCJHL). The church has adopted a constitution for its Ecclesiastical Court, which henceforth provides for gender equality when dealing with family issues including inheritance. The Constitution voted on by the Synod accepted equality in family life, including equal inheritance between male and female members in a family. The prevailing constitutions for Ecclesiastical Courts often give women 1/8th of the inheritance of men. The change in the Ecclesiastical law and the use of gender as a theological concept to be incorporated by the church teaching and preaching was discussed and reflected with leadership from the women's organizations and pastors.<sup>14</sup>

In the international diakonia area, also integrated the GJP into their work in humanitarian and development which is mainly implemented by the Department of World Service in the LWF Communion. A practical tool with guidelines for implementation was developed and country programs are appropriating these guidelines in their own specific context. World Service aims intentionally to address gender equality in order to reinforce justice and inclusiveness for women. In the programmatic work, as a rights-based organization, World Service is committed to undertake measures to end discrimination against women in all forms and recognizes the vital role women play in mitigating the effects of disaster, in conflict resolution and in dealing with crises.

Another major field of opportunities and changes that the implementation of the GJP brought about since its adoption is in the ecumenical advocacy platforms and spaces. One specific opportunity is a training of advocacy for Faith Based Organizations with a special focus on women's human rights, which is supporting specific member churches to actively engage with advocacy efforts through reporting on challenges in realizing human rights for women in their contexts through the UN Commission on the Elimination all forms of Violence and Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The aim of such training is to build-up the capacity of churches and faith-based organizations to use UN mechanisms to effectively impact policy changes and implementation of national laws to overcome women's discrimination and violence.

The GJP also became an important tool to discuss gender from a faith perspective at the Commission on the Status of Women (an United Nations platform to address women's empowerment and gender justice); this platform provides the space to gather good practices and challenges of the ecumenical family in areas of concern regarding gender justice

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<sup>13</sup> To see more about the experience in Finland: <https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/growing-towards-inclusive-community-finnish-church>.

<sup>14</sup> To see more about the experience in the Holy Land: <https://www.lutheranworld.org/news/holy-land-lutherans-adopt-gender-justice-ecclesiastical-court-constitution>.



intertwined with advocacy for women human rights. With the implementation of the Gender Justice Policy a clear area of concern is the need for sustained efforts to disconnect the religious beliefs from harmful and unjust practices against women that are the result of patriarchal cultural norms and to enhance the church leaders' ownership and commitment to the understanding of gender justice as a central value of the church in public spaces and actions.

## **Further developments – The LWF Assembly resolutions relating to gender justice and challenges to be addressed as the ongoing implementation**

The Twelfth LWF Assembly, in Namibia, in 2017 was a milestone in the commemorations of reformation anniversary. At this global gathering the delegates of the 145 member churches ruled to establish the strategic directions in LWF programmatic work in the years to come. Regarding gender justice and the policy implementation the following resolutions are relevant:<sup>15</sup>

### **Resolution on theological education**

“The LWF and its member churches must take steps to ensure theological education also takes account of different contexts and is open to all. Our contextual readings of the Bible must be connected to our theological identity ... The Assembly calls upon the LWF Communion Office to develop and publish a strategy by 2020 for collaboration to provide greater access to theological education.”

### **Women in the ordained ministry**

Calling for a process to study experiences of women in ordained ministry. “The Assembly directs the LWF Communion Office to develop a written process for accompanying member churches in dialogue on women in the ordained ministry.” “While also acknowledging that not all member churches are at the same point on the journey towards women in ordained ministry – that some member churches are still moving toward full inclusion and participation of women - we are convinced that the scriptural witness, in its breadth and scope, honors the equality of all created in God’s image and recognizes the gifts of all in the same Spirit to those baptized into the new creation.”

### **Gender Justice Policy**

“The Assembly commends the work done on the Gender Justice Policy, celebrates its positive reception and its translation into twenty-three languages thus far and urges the member churches to encourage their parishes to make Gender Justice a part of their curriculums.”

### **Sex education and elimination of sexual and gender-based violence**

“The Assembly directs the LWF Communion Office and encourages member churches to focus on sexual education, and the elimination of sexual and gender-based violence, including domestic violence, rape, sexual coercion and sexual harassment, WITHIN our churches.”

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<sup>15</sup> The full text and all other Assembly outcomes, message, resolutions and public statements can be accessed at <https://www.lwfassembly.org/en/assembly/assembly-outcomes>.



### Refugees, internally displaced persons and forced migration

“The Assembly commends the LWF member churches and LWF World Service for their long-standing work amongst and for refugees and displaced people regardless of religious affiliation. ... The Assembly commends countries that open their borders to receive refugees and displaced people ... The Assembly acknowledges the stress sometimes placed on host communities in the process of receiving new residents and providing for their well-being.”

### Sustainable Development Goals

“The Assembly affirms the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and calls upon all the member churches to intensify their education and work on the SDGs, develop concrete programs, to work on achieving the SDGs in their respective countries and engage governments and national or local organizations for implementation of SDGs.”

The set of resolutions and agreements taken at the main decision space, as it is the Communion Assembly, are pointing strategic directions in the programmatic work in the Communion as well as giving direction to the work to be implemented by member churches. But, even if these resolutions are to be integrated into strategies and work plans, it is still an issue of later development to transform practices in theories, to interact theological understanding with praxis.

There is a challenge to integrate the radical notion of gender justice as more than a kit of technics to be applied or to be studied, and changes will automatically happen. There is a huge difference between a good will approach and an intentional change-provoking perspective, which is directed to personal and individual attitudes as well as well as structures.

There are some challenges that assuming feminism and feminist theology as a political notion to gender justice would be a privilege field of attention in the LWF programmatic work with women’s leadership and empowerment and gender justice. “To speak on gender in epistemology is to affirm that in the social construction of human knowing, the masculine and the feminine need to express their particular ways of being in the world...we should abandon the universalization and overgeneralization of the masculine at the expenses of the feminine.”<sup>16</sup> A feminist perspective can help a broader understanding of gender justice, avoiding the dichotomization and polarization of women and men.

### **The challenges of feminism and its necessary theological disruptions – some thoughts to move in an ongoing reformation**

Here I am proposing some ways to continue deepening the conversations of contextualized construction of knowledges in a Communion of churches in the field of gender justice.

Feminist theology as a theoretical and practical ground to address the injustices based on gender will necessary break down the hierarchical and sacred order, where men have power over all things and people, as God has power over, determines limits and imposes “His” wish, legislation and order, punishing and saving. It is organizing religious power based on hierarchy and a notion of power over. A critical approach to religion and faith, with feminist perspectives will address the system of privilege and oppression that is known as patriarchal system. The churches’ practice, diaconal work and theological

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<sup>16</sup> Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 58.

reflections are part and parcel of the critical approach to faith and religion, which can help to dismantle the frequently dangerous connection between religion and culture that relegates women to the private sphere where violence most frequently occurs.

Using the reformation ideas and ideals, specifically the critic of indulgences, Ivone Gebara brings a very interesting parallel to the work to be done with women and gender in churches and theological fields. In her message on the occasion she received the honorary *causa doctorate* in Faculdades EST, Brazil. August 13, 2014, she proposed this interesting association of Luther's ninety-five theses, his critic against indulgences, and the struggle of women in theological thinking, in the church and in society. I am taking her discourse as the systematization of one challenge or theological disruption needed in our work with gender justice in the Communion, and this would need further development and interactions with experiences in the LWF Communion.

Today the problem and the challenge is that women while having a continuing public recognition, still are facing a cultural believe system that there is a "feminine nature" inferior to the masculine and the consequences of this kind of belief to the culture, to social life and to the life of the Christian churches. In my view, the struggle against indulgences could be read contemporary, among other things, as an attitude against giving favours to women more than recognizing the same rights in different contextual cultural settings. We don't want indulgences, but the possibility to affirm our call to freedom in different social situations and religious institutions. We do not seek favours to comfort us of our condition. Neither have we sought privileges inside the current authoritarian systems. It is the progress of all humanity and the commitment to love our neighbour that moves women's theological production. It is in thinking life from our quotidian, with the wounds of our bodies, and the embarrassing situations that we are experiencing that makes our theology not first of all a theoretical reflection about God and the World, but the expression of concrete stories and suffering that we live daily. Recognizing the feminist struggles and among them feminist theology is recognizing the right of citizenship in a pluralist society; it is also a coherent way of reading The Gospel of Jesus Christ in our times.<sup>17</sup>

A second disruption needed is in a context of growing fundamentalism and violent extremism, where women are victims of conflicts and their bodies are subject to violation and rape. In this reality where fragmentation of human beings are (is ?) the norm, the notion of being in a Communion, bounded together by faith is a very rich concept to expand and to use in the work for justice and freedom for all, women and men.

Again, another concept I learned from Ivone Gebara gives me the language and the image to pursue another theological disruption needed: the notion of religious biodiversity.

This is a biodiversity of 're-binding (re-ligare), of being re-linked or re-bound. It is a re-attributing to religion its role in building worlds and meanings that relate to daily life and give direction – as well flavors and colors of its own... without imperialistic

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<sup>17</sup> Ivone Gebara's thank you message on the occasion she received the *Honoris causa doctorate* in Faculdades EST, Brazil. August 13, 2014. She is proposing an association of Luther's ninety-five theses and the struggle of women in theological thinking, in the church and in society. She is doing this association building on the idea that Luther's critic against indulgences was because of the humiliation of human condition and responsibility that this practice caused.

intentions and claims, if not it is obstructing the flow of biodiversity... which has consequences of justifying the destruction not only of the beliefs systems but of the whole earth.<sup>18</sup>

“So, to bring biodiversity into theological reflection is to open ourselves up to pluralism in the expressions of Christian experience, and therefore to change our understanding of what “unity” is.”<sup>19</sup>

What I am advocating for is that religion and theology interact with the public sphere contributing and promoting transformation of unjust structures that produce excluded and marginalized. Our Lutheran theology helps us to produce a narrative and practice that engages in movements of change and transformation.<sup>20</sup>We are freed and gifted to engage.

What unites us is the desire to reconstruct our human relationships and to develop in ourselves the values of sharing and mercy that are so often forgotten by the current system. What unites us is the need to feel, once again, the warmth of bodies around a common table, the need to be persons and not just numbers among so many others. What unites us is the desire to create a common language, to reclaim symbols that are connected to our history and that evoke the noblest things in us.<sup>21</sup>

We want to change individuals, but also structures. Our theology is helping us to move, to engage not only in personal changes and attitudes, that are more sustainable and just, but especially to address systemic and structural needs of transformation, working for good governance and improved institutions that are inclusive and have open doors, hospitable and welcoming to the other.

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<sup>18</sup> Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 206.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>20</sup> See “The church in the Public Space. A study document of the Lutheran World Federation,” Department for Theology and Public Witness. 2016.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*