



Response to Keynote Address

Rt. Rev. Dr Fredrick Shoo (ELCT)

Sisters and brothers,

I am honoured to offer my reflections, thoughts and responses to the very rich message we have heard from our keynote address speaker. I thank the keynote speaker for a well thought, well tailored and well-presented address.

The speech points to a reality we all must face, namely – change. Change is the only constant. We are here reminded of Heraclitus’ aphorism “no one ever steps in the same river twice”. Change and its associate crisis should sensitize the church to recognise and respond to God’s call to address the signs of time. Crisis (Gk *krisis* – decision) implies time for making decision. Responding to change and crisis demands a change in thinking patterns and structures meant to spread the gospel in serving God’s people – this is Reformation – the transformation of form.

The fact that this speech is anchored on biblical and historical attestation stresses the importance of handling the issues presented with utter seriousness **and from our worldview as Lutherans**. The challenge the speech throws to the church universal is immense. The message to the growing churches in the global south – Africa, and particularly Tanzania, included – is that growth is a change that breeds crisis. Growth demands reform. New wine should not be put in old wineskins (Luke 5). We must acknowledge something positive in the Rich Fool’s thinking – the old barns cannot accommodate the bumper harvest (Luke 12).



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Just like churches whose membership is reducing in numbers, churches with growing numbers face a challenge related to service. We must confess and let go of the irresponsible euphoria and triumphalism accompanying growth **in numbers**. Those who fill **the pews of** our churches are not just many, they are – and probably even more important – **diverse**. They have difference and varied needs and expectations. And **some** of the expectations are, theologically speaking ‘unfounded’ – they need guidance. **They need formation in foundational principles of our faith in Jesus Christ.** The question we should **therefore** constantly ask ourselves is whether our systems of service **and our ministries** meet the needs of the people **in our churches**. In addition, full churches do not **always** mean that all have ‘come in’. To paraphrase Prof. Tomas Halik (the key note speaker): we should ask ourselves, ‘what are the signs of time in this growth?’ ‘what is God calling us to respond to in this crisis?’ Stewards should not boast of results in an intermediate step of a process the end result of which they cannot determine! The church must distance itself from claiming credit for its growth. Growth remains a change – a crisis – time for making decision – time for asking God for direction and guidance.

Dear sisters and brothers, I want to be very clear. We in churches like the ELCT, EECMY and others that are experienced growth in the number of our members consider this growth as a great blessing. Yes, there are challenges, but there is an immense joy that comes with numeric increase in our churches. It is reminiscent of the testimony recorded in Acts 2:47.

In line with the theme of **this Thirteenth Assembly of the LWF**, and the challenges put forth by the keynote address, our churches must acknowledge and confess that **the persistence of poverty and injustices** are to a significant degree results of the church’s inability to express oneness with the society. The church’s alienation – its lack of unity in ‘spirit’ – with the **poor, the vulnerable and** marginalised, has contributed to the economic and social sufferings of the masses. Jean-Marc Ela’s titles *My Faith as an Africa* and *African Cry* have not found much resonance with the



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church's efforts in addressing the social and economic crisis besetting Africa today. Rather than being important ingredients in addressing the cries of **the** people, the writings of **Jean-Marc Ela** and other **Pan African thought leaders** like Julius Nyerere, Kwame Nkrumah and Leopold Senghor seem to have been relegated to **history**. Such **teachings** may have **sounded** too **radical and** revolutionary to a 'peace seeking' church that does not want to engage 'peace disrupting' efforts. Such inactivity in the church overlooks the severity of poverty, **injustice, disease and violence**.

In many African countries, poverty has created complex, ramified and ruinous scenarios. It has on the one hand been idolised. In this, poverty has bred some kind of self-pity manifest in 'spiritualization' of ordeals – 'God is on the side of the poor'. The handling of Covid-19 pandemic by some Christians made me ask myself a lot of questions. A significant proportion of Christians tended to consider prayer, devoid of any precautionary measures enough! My word of counsel was 'do not test (tempt) God. In a slightly different but relevant context Paul says 'I will pray with the spirit and I will pray with the mind also' (1 Cor. 14:15). On the other hand, poverty has been used as bait by insincere preachers who exploit those running away from it for personal gain. **This is partially why misleading theologies have taken root in Africa and other countries both in the global South and in the West. These scenarios demand that the church takes up the call to oneness of the creation seriously – seeing the suffering of the masses in light of its complacency, and determining to take decisive action to respond to the needs, the rights and the dignity of people in our churches and societies. This is a call to reclaim and reaffirm the holistic mission of the church – which encompasses Leitourgia (Worship / Celebration), Koinonia (Communion / Relationship), Martyria (Testimony / Evangelism) Kerygma (Proclamation of the Good News) and Diakonia (Service to all in Christ). Allow me to add that the prophetic Diakonia and advocacy of the churches plays a crucial role in addressing the challenges of our times.**



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Rather than being put off and frustrated by the crises in our context, the church in Africa needs to recognise and exploit resources at its disposal. In the first place, the church needs to realise that the plight of Africa is not attributable to Africa alone – the big nations have a lion share in the suffering of millions of people, not only in Africa but across the globe. The church in Africa should call – and I hereby beseechingly call – sister churches in the West to raise a prophetic voice against the atrocities perpetrated by their nations. Churches in the West should rebuke their nations' engagement in all forms of injustice like, production and trade in weapons of mass destruction, activities that contribute to environmental degradation and climate change, trade imbalance and all sorts of inhumane policies and actions. And here, while full of admiration and thanks for what churches in the West have done, I emphasize – you need to do more!

Allow me to speak to the need for a meaningful and mutual relationship and solidarity between our churches globally. The paradoxical way in which some Christians and churches in the South relate to those in the West is yet another crisis we are facing. I see in churches in Africa, especially those born of the 19th C missionary work, a relational crisis between Christians in Africa and the West. On the one hand, churches in the West are **primarily** considered benefactors. **We must transform this relationship into one of equals – as one family of God.** We share the same identity - **One body One Spirit and One Hope.**

As churches in the global south, we treasure the good relationship we have with churches in the West. However, if we see members of our communion from Europe and North America primarily as benefactors, we easily idolise them as supporters without whom we cannot manage our affairs. This makes our relationship fragile. But perhaps hidden in such a sensitive relation is hypocrisy because on the other hand, Christians in the West are considered lost in their unbridled liberalism – they are not one with us! As a result, the church in Africa is



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sometimes caught in a moral crisis; how can it rebuke or correct the church in the West? Neither the churches or Christians in Africa who have parted ways with fellow Christians in the West, nor those that maintain a 'hypocritical' relation exhibit the spirit of oneness of the church as professed in the third article of faith.

Sister and brothers, I also noted, probably more importantly, **that** the keynote address points us to hope! In the dark nights of history – in the valley of dry bones – the Lord of the Church says 'my grace is sufficient' – 'my power is made perfect in weakness' (2 Cor. 12:9). Probably weary of the idealism and unfruitfulness of the notion of mission as movement from centre to periphery, from positions of power to positions of weakness; missiologists today see reality in 'mission from the margins'. Rather than succumbing to sanctimony, the church is called to recognise the presence of Christ in its weaknesses. The church must stand and face critical remarks that even question its relevance in the society. The church must acknowledge where it has become anti-mission – where due to the illusion that things must remain the same – it has resisted change. Andrew Kirk sees in mission – the act of listening and hearing. According to him, "Understanding 'What is Mission' is a matter for the whole people of God, listening to what the Spirit of Jesus says to the churches, hearing the sorrows and joys of people's daily lives and listening to one another: In part, 'I am, because you are.'" (Kirk 1999). 'I am, because you are' – 'I am thought of, therefore I am'. This is the oneness we should all cherish. **It is embodied in the deep African philosophy of Ubuntu.** I see in the keynote address a tonic for renewed thinking and practice of mission. **And for this, I am grateful to Prof. Halik.** I wish you fruitful deliberations.

Thank you.



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The [Thirteenth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation](#) takes place 13-19 September 2023 in Krakow, Poland. The theme of the Assembly will be “One Body, One Spirit, One Hope.” It will be hosted by the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Poland.



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