

African Realities Today Through Lutheran Lenses

Colleagues,

Last September Gary Simpson, systematic theology prof at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota, was whisked to Tanzania, not quite like Elijah and the fiery chariot (but close), for a Lutheran World Federation event. Since he's my "Doktor-kind," Seminex's first doctorate granted in systematic theology, I try to keep track of him. Not easy to do with all the irons he has in the fire. But to keep me mildly up-to-date he sends me stuff now and again. Which is proper protocol on his part toward his Doktorvater. He sent me this the other day. I have his permission to pass it on to you. Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Reversing Poverty in Africa: The Role of Governments and Civil Society

What Does this Mean? "Africa Is The Lord's and The Fullness Thereof. Praise Be the Lord."

(Psalm 151:1-2)

Lutheran World Federation Consultation on Poverty and The Mission of the Church in Africa

Arusha, Tanzania

6 September 2006

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ here in Africa. Thank you very humbly for inviting me to reflect with you on the theme for this third day of our consultation. I am a pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, a teacher of the church and professor of theology at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN, U.S. A.

My assignment is to address the question, "What does this mean?" This, of course, is Martin Luther's famous question asked throughout his catechisms. By asking, "What does this mean?" Luther was asking, "What is God up to in the world?" In the context of this consultation, then, we can ask, "What is God up to in Africa today?" My task today is to be a theological witness, to give voice to what I have seen and heard and experienced among you in light of God's Word and work. I will offer, therefore, theological reflection that connects the themes from all three days so far.

What I have witnessed these three days is that God is up to transformative, innovative, emancipatory, and reconciliatory things. To use the metaphor that several have already cited, God is up to "eagle" things. I have eleven theological reflections. First, let us dwell in the Holy Scriptures on Psalm 24: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." The Holy Spirit has, of course, provided us with 150 psalms. In light of our African context here I suggest "Psalm 151:1-2" as follows:

"AFRICA IS THE LORD'S AND THE FULLNESS THEREOF.

PRAISE BE THE LORD."

- 1. Africa is an abundant continent! On the first day of our consultation Dr. Senait Bahta of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Eritrea prophetically announced, "Africa is not*

a poor continent; rather, it has been dispossessed." Indeed, Africa is an abundant continent! In this light Dr. Kjell Nordstokke of the Lutheran World Federation noted in his opening remarks, "Poverty in Africa is a scandal."

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- 2. Africa is an abundant continent precisely because the triune God is an abundant God. Yes, God is an abundant triune communion of three divine persons. This theological truth underlies Dr. Bahta's prophetic announcement that Africa is an abundant continent. God's abundance resides in the three divine persons-Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit -who freely and fully share in each other's open reality and who freely share their abundance in the creation of all things.*

God's being is communion. This theological confession goes back to the Holy Scriptures and was mediated to the church catholic through an insight developed in the ancient African Christian tradition innovated by Athanasius of Egypt in the fourth century after Christ. The tradition following Athanasius used the ancient Greek word perichoresis to express the rich, free sharing of all things among the divine persons of the trinity. This ancient word, perichoresis, had its everyday setting in the mutual sharing of burdens and joys within flourishing neighborhoods of the ancient world. The church today will do well to retrieve the truth of perichoresis as central to the life of the church in Africa, and throughout the world.

In his own time of the sixteenth century in Europe Martin Luther capitalized on this Athanasian tradition of perichoresis to develop the biblical theology of the

cross of the incarnate, crucified, risen, and ascended Jesus and the Holy Spirit's justifying, promising abundance of faith alone in God and love alone for the neighbor. Because God's triune abundance means Africa is an abundant continent, Lutherans in Africa might find themselves agreeing with the African American prophet, Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights slogan, "God don't make no junk." For this reason racial discrimination and economic dispossession are scandals of the highest caliber.

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3. The church in Africa is rich. Bishop Zephania Kameeta of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia stated this in our consultation's keynote address, "The Self-Understanding of the Church and Poverty in Africa." Bishop Martin Shao of the Northern Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania echoed this same sentiment and stressed the wholistic nature of the African church's richness. Churchly richness must never be understood reductionistically. Theologically speaking the church's wholistic abundance has its continuing source, strength, and joy in the perichoretic sharing of God's being as communion.

In an afternoon conversation on 6 September 2006 President Dr. Thomas Nyiwe of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Cameroon and Bishop Dr. Musa Biyela of the Diocese of Swaziland, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in South Africa, raised the question of gradual erosion, even eclipse, of the African ethos of sharing under certain economic globalizing dynamics. This question must now be raised up for critical analysis, testing, and response.

The erosion of ecclesial sharing contradicts the very being and life of the church in Africa because it contradicts the perichoretic life and abundance of the triune God promised and made present by the Holy Spirit in the justifying word for the sake of the entire world.

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- 4. The church in Africa is ripe for innovation in leadership. In his keynote address Bishop Kameeta pointed to the crying necessity for a new form of leadership. God is providing a new opportunity for the African church, an opportunity for the benefit of the entire church catholic, to innovate in ecclesial leadership. What is the "new" in new leadership? Again, we can borrow from the African Athanasian tradition of perichoresis. What is the shape of perichoretic leadership in contrast to hierarchy? What is the nature of perichoretic-shared power in contrast to unipolar power? What are the habits of perichoretic practices in contrast to one-directional, one-dimensional, infantilizing practices? Bishop Kameeta took note of the shortage of wide participatory ways of ecclesial life and research. Reverend Marie Barnett of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Sierra Leone led a sustained and energized deliberation about women leadership relative to general ecclesial leadership. In an opening devotion on 6 September Sister Petrine Shimi of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia urged churches in Africa to listen attentively to the Holy Spirit who is calling us "to team-up with God." Here again we are witnessing God's perichoretic ways with the church, ways that do not leave untouched and untransformed the very character and practice of church leadership.*

The time is ripe to reflect on what we can call “the participatory golden rule”: “decision-makers must be consequence-takers; and vice versa!-consequence-takers must be decision-makers.” Yes, indeed, consequence-takers must be decision-makers! Those who bear the impoverishing, dispossessing consequences of economic policy must be full participants with effective voice in decision-making processes, procedures and bodies.

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5. Innovative perichoretic leadership and power readies the church in Africa to be “critical public companions” with government and civil society. Bishop Kameeta introduced a third crucial point in his keynote address that the churches in Africa be in “critical solidarity” with governments and civil society. This entails a reconsideration of the church’s interaction with national, regional, and local governments within the diversity of African countries. As African nations strengthen democratic forms of government Lutheran churches will have new opportunities to engage, influence, and lead the flourishing and welfare of the African continent. Innovating churchly leadership with perichoretic practices will increase our capacities to lead within African nations. As we innovate churchly leadership we can inaugurate churches, congregations, and diaconal institutions as “critical public companions” (G. Simpson, 2002) with government and civil society. The vocation of Lutherans as critical public companions is another crucial case of “teaming-up with God,” as we will see in a subsequent point.

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6. God puts us Lutherans here in Africa “for such a time as this!” Sister Petrine Shimi of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia stunned us on the morning of 6 September when she announced to us God’s Word: “You were put here in Africa ‘for such a time as this’” (Esther 4:14). This is a theological truth claim of the highest magnitude. The triune God is a time-full God. God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is not some timeless, aloof, invulnerable god, unmoved by earthly things and earthly sufferings. We African Lutherans are put here “for such a time as this” precisely because God is a timely, incarnated, crucified, risen and reigning God. The African American theologian Martin Luther King, Jr. began his prophetic ministry on 5 December 1954 by announcing, “There comes a time.” There comes a time when God’s people can no longer tolerate racial discrimination and remain silent in the face of economic dispossession. God is a time-full and timely God and calls Lutheran churches in Africa “for such a time as this.”
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7. In this era God is doing something revolutionary across the globe, raising up a new reality called civil society. It is incumbent upon African churches in our time to imagine God’s presence and work in and through civil society. Lutheran churches in Africa are well positioned to research and develop the dynamics of this rapidly emerging new global civil society and the hopeful signs for developing more participatory, democratic governments and stakeholder economies. How is God in civil society calling Lutheran churches in Africa to a new vocation for human flourishing on this abundant continent? Now is the time to reflect deeply on the vocation, procedures, and

practices of churchly citizenship.

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8. *The emerging vocation of civil society across Africa provides new opportunities for developing more democratic forms of government. The Honorable Mizango Pinda, Minister of State, Prime Minister's Office, Regional Administration and Local Government, United Republic of Tanzania, presented a brilliant, provocative, and comprehensive picture of "Reversing Impoverishing Trends in Africa: The Role of Government and Civil Society-Tanzania Experience." Both Reverend Marie Barnett of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Sierra Leone and Sister Rejoice Agongtara of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Nigeria stressed from the perspective of their national locations the critical need for a vibrant, vigorous civil society in the process of promoting responsive, participative democratic forms of government. Without vigilant civil societies based in and growing out of everyday life situations even democratic governments drift at a distance from the people.*

While administrative power is the prime medium of government and money is the prime medium of market economies, "solidarity" is the prime medium of civil society as Dr. Thomas Nyiwe stressed in his consultation address. Civil society solidarity is a crucial factor if democratic governments are to effectively reverse poverty on widespread bases. Minister Pinda gave an overview of the constitutional and legal "space" provided to civil society within the Tanzanian situation. There is a crucial "role" for civil society and he enumerated eighteen challenges that government and civil society interaction must take on. The sociological notion of

“role” is acceptable as far as it goes. But according to sociological imagination some entity, usually some governmental or economic organization, assigns the “role” and ushers the assigned “role” to its place. The church can go beyond the sociological imagination of role assignment and hear God’s living word calling civil society to be God’s own “left hand” minister of solidarity, to use Martin Luther’s formulation. The church’s vocational imagination will constantly attend to God’s call to civil society and thereby not allow civil society to flinch especially when it exercises its “critical solidarity” tasks (see especially Pinda, 9.1.4). There will come times when civil society will need to elbow for public space in order to voice its solidarity with people in poverty and under unjust dispossession.

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9. The diaconal ministry organizations of the Lutheran churches in Africa will realize opportunities for new learnings. Minister Pinda identified five specific sectors for joint action and partnership among government, civil society, and economic organizations within the Tanzanian situation: education, health, participatory planning and capacity building, environment, and human rights and good governance (8.3-8.11). Dr. Thomas Nyiwe has emphasized the new learnings which diaconal ministries will be able to undertake. Historically Lutheran churches in Africa have been strong and effective leaders and providers in the area of education and health and to some degree in capacity building. Now we must enter fully into participatory planning, sustainable environmental protection, and into the protection and expansion of

human rights and the promotion and accountability of good, effective, and efficient democratic governance. The church's diaconal ministry has historically followed closely on the classic six works of mercy announced by Jesus to feed the hungry, quench the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, heal the sick, and accompany the imprisoned (Matthew 25). The church will now capitalize on our deep knowledge and expertise by bringing this knowledge and expertise to the public policy-making table for actualizing ever more just ways of life. Diaconal ministry now inextricably links together works of mercy with prophetic works of justice. In this way the church's essential diaconal ministry continues growing in new contexts and times across the prophetic (critical solidarity), the sapiential (wisdom for everyday living), and the pacific (just peacebuilding) dimensions of the diaconal.

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10. "Give us this day our daily bread." Jesus gave to the church catholic his petition to pray fervently and frequently for daily bread. In his catechisms for the church Martin Luther noted four crucial aspects of this petition. First, Jesus gives this petition for daily bread both as a command that we must pray it and as a promise by God so that we may trustingly expect God to answer. The Lutheran churches in Africa frequently and fervently obey this command and trust this promise. Second, daily bread means precisely that, "bread," bread in all of its materiality for nurturing the body. Luther rejected centuries of Christian interpretation that reductionistically "spiritualized" or de-materialized this petition. Luther emphasized the biblical materiality

(not materialism) of daily bread. Jesus gives this wonderful petition because humans as bodily creatures “need” daily bread. Lutherans in Africa today follow strongly in this tradition of interpretation and action.

Third, Luther noted that Jesus meant this petition very “comprehensively.” That is, daily bread includes everything that it takes to produce, deliver, and receive daily bread. Luther noted especially the need for good, just, responsive government. He even urged governments to place a loaf of bread on their national seals and emblems rather than symbols of war. Luther further noted that God reserved one entire commandment-“Thou shalt not steal”-out of ten to cover economic life. Luther emphasized not only not stealing our neighbors’ property and business but that God’s command also requires all people to help protect and develop the property and livelihood of all our neighbors without prejudice or discrimination.

On numerous occasions Luther himself wrote on the obligations that this commandment placed upon governments relative to the economic life of sixteenth-century Germany. This commandment obligates churches in Africa to do likewise in our contexts. Bishop Paul Fynn of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Ghana fervently pleads that Lutheran churches in Africa develop practical strategic action regarding the economic life of specific contexts. Biblical materiality recognizes the Godly possibilities for practical strategic action. If people and organizations of good will do not undertake God pleasing strategic action, then powerful global entities and interests will plan strategically, often under dispossessing interests. Brother Enos Moyo of the LWF Zambia Christian Refugee Service and Sister Lorpu Mannah

of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Liberia have shown us comprehensive programs and strategic action plans for local capacity building and just peacemaking. These and many other examples urge Lutheran churches in Africa to multiply similar efforts and innovate new initiatives geared toward local practical situations. Few entities are as close to the ground as are the Lutheran churches in Africa and thereby as able to be effective and efficient as we abide faithful to our Lord's petition for daily bread.

Fourth, Luther noted that Jesus' petition meant both that daily bread would be available and thus "used" but that Jesus prayed that our daily bread would also be "enjoyed." Here again Jesus proclaims to the church and the world the joy of proper biblical materiality. The triune God's created abundance is for the joy of all creation, for the joy of Africa. The Lutheran churches in Africa excel in the doxological ministry of joy in all diaconal service.

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11. With vigilance the Lutheran churches in Africa welcome a new era of cooperation between governments and civil society for the flourishing of all people. Minister Pinda notes (10.1) the "irreversible process" since 2001 of cooperation between government and civil society in Tanzania. We can take this statement as a positive and noteworthy promise. On the other hand, we can never take such cooperation as inevitable or irreversible. Each national situation has its own particulars constitutionally, legally, socially, economically, and culturally. Lutheran churches in Africa will attend with

*care to particularity. Hopeful eternal vigilance is the democratic citizen ethos appropriate for Lutheran churches that pray, watch, wait, and act upon Jesus' petition for daily bread. As Lutherans in Africa we thank and praise God for calling us "for such a time as this."
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Thank you, brother and sister Lutherans, for allowing me to testify to what I have seen and heard and experienced among you during this consultation, and I pray God's perichoretic abundance be upon all that you undertake in the name of the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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