

## MESSAGE FROM THE MEETING OF THE BALTIC LUTHERAN BISHOPS

The leaders of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Estonia, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia and Evangelical Lutheran Church of Lithuania met in Tallinn on the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> of November, 2009 to strengthen the long experience of unity of the Lutheran churches in the Baltic countries and to pray for the fellowship among Christians of the whole world, recognizing that in our time the ties among and within Christian communities in many places are put to the test. Bishops also discussed tasks and responsibilities of their churches looking for better ways of co-operation in the future. Christian faith means living with Christ and serving one another.

Especially at times of the economic difficulties when so many people have lost their external foothold and inner peace, we invite our compatriots to expand their appreciation of their Christian roots and to utilize all the spiritual wealth that is revealed in the Holy Scripture and offered to everyone who turns to God and puts their trust on Christ. The present crisis in the world economy is a fruit of a long term failure to act accordingly the principles which God has laid in the foundations of His creation. Consumerism and individualism of the modern society have taken their toll. To look for solution only by means of mending economy would mean to repeat the same mistake. A spiritual renewal must come first, a renewed sense of balance between rights and obligations, communion empathy, solidarity, and mutual support. We believe that the most convincing inner motivation for that change is found in an encounter of a person with the living Christ. To facilitate that encounter by word and deed is the first and foremost calling of the Christian church. Jesus Christ said: "Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you." (Matt.28:19-20)

The Christian community as a part of the society is not separated from issues related to the natural and human environment both locally and globally. Justice in the society and life quality of the people or protection of our Baltic Sea against the state negligence and corporate exploitation are some of the critical examples of this area of concern. As communities gathered around the Word of God and the keepers of Christian ethos our churches must address the spiritual root-causes of the contemporary problems. The churches must remember that the main instrument entrusted to them by God is His word – the law and the gospel - and the service to the neighbour in charity.

We also invite our political powers to realize more clearly the spiritual dimension of the human life and the good fruits of a positive co-operation between state, municipalities, schools and the church. Teaching and implementing Christian principles strengthen the family as well as the whole community. Liberty of conscience and freedom of speech belong to the values of society defining religious life not only as a private but also as a public social right which has to be fostered. Religious education and religious studies form an inseparable part of this right.

At the present time a common witness of churches is vitally important, therefore we express our deepest concern about modern tendencies that weaken the fellowship among Christians and cause divisions in and among churches. The recent decisions made by some member churches of the Lutheran World Federation to approve of religious matrimony for couples of the same gender and to equate such conjugal life with marriage or to ordain non celibate homosexual persons for pastoral or episcopal office epitomize these tendencies that are tearing apart fellowship among Christians. We affirm that the marriage is the conjugal life between a man and a woman and that a homosexual activity is incompatible with the discipleship of Christ. We believe that in following the modern trends, churches are departing from the apostolic doctrine of human sexuality and marriage. We see the Lutheran communion and eccumenical efforts endangered by such decisions and actions because they lead to a situation where the Lutheran churches, members of the Lutheran World

Federation are not able to fully recognize each others ecclesiastical offices, to exchange the ministries and to participate together in preaching the Word and celebrating the sacraments.

We call upon our Lutheran sisters and brothers to unity and co-operation based upon the foundation of Holy Scripture and loyalty to the Lutheran confessions. Contemporary challenges demand a firm stand based upon timeless truths and values. The common understanding of the Gospel by churches is a treasure we cannot afford to lose and it needs to be passed on to the current and future generations. Our mission is to be faithful in that which we have received, God's mercy. We are to serve our Lord and our neighbours thus until we *all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God* (Eph. 4:13)

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