

**VELKD General Synod 9th – 11th November 2017, Bonn, Germany**  
**Theme:** Future on Firm Foundation – Perceptions, Realities and Perspectives.

*Morning Devotion on Friday 10th November 2017*  
*Led by Archbishop Dr. Musa Panti Filibus, LWF President*  
*(Ezekiel 34:1-2, 4, 7, 11, 16).*

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ;

I bring you greetings on behalf of the member churches of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), also from my home church, the Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. I am delighted and honored to be with you at this year's General Synod and to share some thoughts based on selected verses from Ezekiel chapter 34.

The historic commemoration of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation will remain for many people, an unforgettable experience. One of the most exciting things I have witnessed in my context in Nigeria is how the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary reawakened as well raised the consciousness of people at various levels on the positive legacy and gifts of the Reformation – rather than the negative stories attached to it. There is no doubt that the themes of the Reformation anniversary particularly liberation by God's grace will continue to shape the agendas of the churches and their institutions in the years to come. We give thanks to God.

It is within this spirit of the Reformation anniversary that I am taking on the words of Ezekiel 34; what message there is for all those that identify themselves as “shepherds” (leaders) but also the Lord's “sheep” (the people).

I do not need to belabor you with details about the why, how and the radical changes that came with Martin Luther's reform actions in the 16th century. It suffices to say, the Reformation was among other things, triggered by the attitude of the Church leadership (papacy) at the time. The church leadership had deviated from its call to care for peoples' souls and was drowned by corrupt practices including making wealth at the expense of the poor that led to the commoditization and/or commercialization of salvation especially through the sale of indulgences. It was against these corrupt systems and theology that emphasized salvation by works, superstitious worship and heathen practice that Martin Luther rose up, holding that salvation is God's grace.

This is the kind of situation that prophet Ezekiel was struggling with in chapter 34. What is most glaring is that the “shepherds” which is a metaphor for political leaders, princes, kings and particularly the priests - have woefully failed. Ezekiel was urged to announce doom: *Woe to you shepherds of Israel ...* (v2, NIV). The leaders have neglected every semblance of what God commanded them to do. They have been fattening themselves instead of feeding the sheep under their care. They ruled the people harshly. The “scattered sheep” a reference to the exile have been neglected. They were not teaching the pure Word of God, but driven by thirst and greed for power and wealth, enriching themselves at the expense of the sheep (34:3–4). In order to succeed, the shepherds were exploiting the people by telling them only what they want to hear instead of what they need to hear.

Ezekiel’s response was not pleasant to the leaders: God is saddened by their attitude and actions. God is against them and will destroy them.

But Ezekiel did not only pronounce criticism for the shepherds. He equally presents a glimmer of hope of rescue for the people of Israel. In verses 11-16, he announced what we can term as rescue mission. And that is the good news! Indeed a glorious promise. The leaders have failed but the people have not been abandoned in their suffering. We all know the story that Jesus told in Luke 15:3-7 about the good shepherd who launched out in search of the one sheep that was lost. This is the kind of operation announced in Ezekiel. The Good Shepherd has not abandoned the people who are scattered in the darkness and gloomy wilderness of exile, but is searching for them. God will rescue them and bring them home; make them lie in green pastures and feed them with *justice* (v13-16). Indeed in Christ we find the fulfillment of this promise. Christ finds all those lost in the wilderness of sin. Justice is the climax of his stand for those who are powerless and exploited.

In a recent interview, a journalist asked me: *Is there need for another Reformation today?* Obviously! The Reformation must continue as a living experience of the people of God precisely because the behaviors and attitudes among the ministers of God that were condemned by the prophet are dangerously taking place today. Issues of exploitation and misuse of power raised by the prophet and conditions that led to the 16th century Reformation are still manifesting in different forms within the church and society. Greed and thirst for absolute power and wealth particularly under the guise of godly works that

Luther also protested against continues to show up in all dimensions of human life and relations including the church.

We are compelled to ask, what is the calling of the church?

Clearly, both church and the world today desperately need leaders that take more seriously their responsibility to care for the people they are called to lead and not misuse their positions for selfish ambitions; to address the question of power and powerlessness. We are called to seek the lost and reach out to people who are brutalized, discriminated, violated, undermined and violently dismembered. Liberated by God's grace, we are bound to Christ as agents of liberation in a broken world, rejecting systems of exploitation of the flock of God of any kind and seek for justice. When people begin to make fellow human beings source of commodity, the sub themes of the LWF 12th Assembly "Not for sale," is our watchword. We must feed the people with God's truth through teaching and preaching and guide them in ways that glorify God by being living examples of what we teach and preach.

Responding to these challenges requires ongoing process of equipping, empowering and facilitating mutual exchange among church leadership. Hence The LWF Twelfth Assembly in its "Resolution on Strategic Priorities and Church Renewal" states:

"The Assembly aspires to see the LWF communion become a central catalyst to the core concerns of church leaders and synods in their ongoing efforts to *be faithful stewards of the gospel* [my emphasis] in times of change, not least in Western churches. The Assembly calls upon the Council ... to create platforms for contextual deliberations, exchange and learning for churches facing change... due to secularization, post secular trends and other societal and demographic factors, requiring that priority should be given to theological, catechetical, and missional revival oriented program work based on issues of common concern."<sup>1</sup>

In all these, may we find encouragement in the message of hope that the ideal shepherd Jesus Christ, cares for his subjects and their (our) needs.

I pray that the Lord would continue to guide this General Synod in its reflections that it may be rooted on a firm foundation that is Christ the Lord. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/compilation\\_of\\_public\\_statements\\_and\\_resolutions\\_at\\_the\\_lwf\\_twelfth\\_assembly\\_en.pdf](https://www.lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/compilation_of_public_statements_and_resolutions_at_the_lwf_twelfth_assembly_en.pdf)