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‘A Changing Church in an Age of Migration’

“The Lutheran World Federation’s work on Migration"

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of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Northern Germany
(es gilt das gesprochene Wort)

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

It is a great pleasure to be here with you today. Let me begin by expressing my sincere gratitude for the invitation to this conference. I have very much enjoyed the inspiring presentations, encounters and conversations so far, and I am looking forward to many more – together with the worship services and, especially, the programme that awaits us this evening at the Night of the Churches. These shared experiences are what make the friendship between our Churches tangible and give it shape.

And I am grateful for the opportunity to be here today, as Vice-President of the Lutheran World Federation for Central and Western Europe, to reflect together with you on a topic that is of profound importance for our Churches and for the societies in which we live: migration and the way in which we accompany people who are on the move.

I am particularly grateful for the opportunity to do this together with members of the Anglican Communion. The cooperation between Anglicans and Lutherans in the field of migration and refugee protection is not something that has developed only recently. It is rooted in a shared Christian understanding of what it means to love and serve our neighbour. At a time when questions of migration and displacement are often discussed in highly polarized and sometimes deeply dehumanizing ways, I believe that this common witness is especially important.

Today I would like to speak about the work of the Lutheran World Federation on migration. I will begin with the LWF itself: who we are, where we come from and why our history matters for the way we approach migration today. I will then look at the different dimensions of our work. But rather than presenting these as separate areas of activity, I would like to show how they belong together and how they are rooted in the core theological convictions of the LWF and of the worldwide Christian community.

And I would like to do this through some concrete examples. Because when we speak about migration, it is easy to begin talking about numbers, policies and international agreements. All of these are important. But behind every number there is a human being, a family, a story, a decision, sometimes a loss, and very often the hope of being able to live a life in safety and dignity.

That is ultimately where the work of the church begins.

1. What is the Lutheran World Federation? – A Communion Born in a Time of Displacement

Let me begin with a few words about the Lutheran World Federation itself, because I believe that this is important for understanding why migration has such a significant place in the life and work of the Lutheran communion.

The LWF is a global communion of Churches in the Lutheran tradition, living and working together for a just, peaceful and reconciled world. It was founded in Lund, Sweden, in 1947, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Lutheran Churches from different parts of the world came together at a time when Europe was still deeply marked by war, antisemitism, political division and enormous human suffering. Millions of people had been displaced, dispossessed, wounded or left without a home and a future. This experience of displacement and loss was also felt in Britain, where many Lutheran refugees from Eastern Europe and the Baltics joined Germans who had fled to England. In 1948, these communities came together to form what is today known as the Council of Lutheran Churches (CLC). Against this background, the LWF maintained a secretary in Great Britain for many years after its founding.

The LWF was therefore born out of a very concrete historical experience: the experience that the suffering of human beings cannot simply be observed from a distance, and that Churches are called to respond together. This is important for our topic today, because it means that responding to displacement is not something external to the LWF's identity. It is part of where we come from.

From the beginning, this response had both a theological and a practical dimension. The Churches came together to confess their faith, to reflect theologically, to seek reconciliation and Christian unity, and to stand together in solidarity with people in need. In the language of the LWF's current strategy, "faith active in love has been interwoven into the fabric of the LWF since its founding."

That experience continues to shape the Federation in all its programmes around the world.

Today, the LWF brings together 153 member Churches representing more than 78 million Christians in 99 countries across seven regions. These Churches live in very different contexts. In some countries, Lutherans are part of a large Christian majority;

in others, they are a small minority. Some Churches have existed for centuries, while others are comparatively young. Some work in highly secular societies, while others witness to the gospel in contexts where religion plays a very strong role in public life.

In their diversity, they journey together, grounded in a shared hope that is not mere optimism, but "firmly rooted in faith and clearly visible through our actions." Such diversity becomes a

strength in which communities practice hospitality, learn from one another, empower churches and people together, and try "to make a positive difference in the world".

The LWF's Strategy for 2025–2031 expresses this mission through four strategic priorities: Responsible Theology, Thriving Churches, Justice and Peace, and Service and Dignity.

When we look at these priorities, it becomes clear why migration is such an important concern for the LWF. Migration is a question of theology, because it raises fundamental questions about who our neighbour is, what human dignity means and what it means to welcome the stranger. It is a question of thriving churches, because churches in many parts of the world are themselves shaped by migration and are often among the first places where migrants, refugees and displaced people find community and support. But migration does not only change the lives of migrants. It also changes the churches that encounter them. Churches become places of arrival, places of encounter and sometimes places of conflict and transformation. Migration challenges churches to rethink who belongs, who leads, who is heard and how we understand our own communion. It is a question of justice and peace, because displacement is frequently connected to war, persecution, poverty, inequality, climate change and violations of human rights.

Because the LWF was born in a world of displacement, migration and shattered communities, the experience of people on the move is not a new concern that has simply been added to its agenda. It is woven into the history, identity and theological vocation of the Lutheran World Federation. And it is from this perspective that I would now like to look more closely at the LWF's engagement with migration: not only what the LWF does, but why this work belongs so deeply to its understanding of the church's calling.

2. "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" – Migration as a Core Theme of the LWF

As I am sure you know, the Bible is full of stories of people who are on the move. Abraham and Sarah leave their homeland. The people of Israel experience slavery, exile and return. Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus flee to Egypt. The Biblical stories repeatedly remind us that human beings can find themselves in situations in which they have to leave what is familiar and seek safety somewhere else.

LWF's work with people on the move is grounded in the Old Testament tradition of welcoming and protecting the stranger. In Leviticus 19:33–34, Israel is commanded to treat the foreigner living among them like a native-born citizen and to love the foreigner as themselves. The text says: "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself." What is important here is that the stranger is not simply someone to whom hospitality or charity should be offered. The biblical command is about treating the foreigner as equal to the native-born citizen. For the LWF has an important implication for migration work today: caring for people on the move also means standing up for their dignity, equality and rights.

Jesus takes up this Old Testament tradition of how the stranger should be treated, but at the same time opens up a new perspective. In Matthew 25:35, Jesus calls his followers to welcome the stranger. But he does not simply call them to do so. Rather, he points to his own experience as a human being among human beings. He says: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me."

Jesus does not simply say, "You should help the stranger." By taking on the role of the stranger himself, he inspires a change of perspective: I could be that person, you could be that person, anyone could be that person. All are children of God, all equal in dignity and infinitely valuable. When I meet the stranger with a welcoming attitude and through concrete action, they are no longer a stranger, but a person whom I encounter as a fellow human being – and where this happens, we encounter the Lord himself.

For the LWF, this verse stands for recognizing the dignity of people who arrive in our communities. And this also means recognizing their rights, their capacities and their agency. Every person on the move bears God-given dignity and must be treated as a person with rights and as an active participant – not as a commodity or as a problem to be managed.

This understanding is also reflected in the words of Fabián Wilches, Senior Advocacy Advisor of the LWF. He puts it this way:

> "For I was hungry, and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me. This practice is part of our faith values at the Lutheran World Federation as a Christian faith-based organization: treating others as we would like to be treated, and expressing compassion, mercy, love and hospitality for everyone, including the newcomer."

In Windhoek in 2017, the Twelfth Assembly of the LWF expressed this commitment through the affirmation "Human Beings are not for Sale." It called for continued advocacy for refugees and migrants and stronger member-church capacity to welcome refugees and provide longer-term services that support participation and self-reliance. The Assembly linked migration to prophetic diakonia, resistance to trafficking and exploitation, and the Church's calling to overcome exclusion through fellowship, worship, advocacy and service. This commitment is understood as an expression of a faith active in love, in which Salvation, Migration and care for Creation are closely intertwined.

In Kraków in 2023, the Thirteenth Assembly reaffirmed this direction in its resolution on Serving with People on the Move. It called on member Churches to act together for people moving because of the climate crisis, conflict, war and human rights violations, and to advocate for the rights of migrants, refugees and internally displaced persons. The broad formulation "people on the move" makes clear that the LWF takes responsibility for people in a wide range of legal situations and with diverse backgrounds and experiences, and that it encounters them not as recipients of assistance but as human beings and partners.

People move for many different reasons. Some are forced to flee because of war, conflict, persecution or human rights violations. Others leave because of poverty, unemployment or a lack of perspectives. Political instability, climate change and environmental degradation can also contribute to people's decisions. And often these factors are intertwined.

The LWF's member churches encounter these realities in very different places. They are present in countries of origin, transit, destination and return. And they act from the shared, faith-based conviction that every person has a dignity that does not depend on nationality, legal status, economic usefulness or social position. This conviction is the foundation on which the practical work of the LWF rests.

3. From Faith to Action: How the LWF Works

Migration has become one of the major challenges of today's world. As a church organization, the LWF operates within a network of many different actors who are engaged with the issue of migration. In cooperation with other churches, one important focus of the work is therefore to ask what particular contribution churches can make to work surrounding migration.

Churches are often locally rooted. They know their communities and are trusted by people who may not have easy access to governmental or international organizations. They can speak to people not only as beneficiaries or service users, but as members of communities. And they are able to address questions of faith. Churches can raise awareness about the risks of irregular migration in areas where international organizations or government authorities may have limited access. And, perhaps particularly important in times of highly politicized debate, churches can draw on their moral authority and credibility to speak for justice and for welcoming the stranger.

This does not mean that churches are automatically wise or immune to prejudice. They are part of society and therefore also affected by the fears, conflicts and political narratives of their societies. But precisely because they are communities of faith, they have resources to challenge exclusion and dehumanization.

The different reasons why people migrate and the different experiences that people on the move have also require the LWF, at an organizational level, to respond in different ways and to connect its different areas of work.

There is international advocacy through Action for Justice. There is practical humanitarian and diaconal work through the LWF World Service. And there is prevention, accompaniment and support through programmes such as Symbols of Hope.

These dimensions are not different worlds. This will become clear in the examples I am going to share. Nevertheless, let me take these dimensions one by one, always linked with examples that show how the work of the LWF takes shape in these different areas.

3.1. Advocacy – Bringing the Experience of Churches into Global Debates

The core task of the LWF's advocacy is to bring the voices and experiences of member Churches

and affected communities into discussions on human rights, migration and refugees, peacebuilding, gender justice and climate justice.

This is important because international policies are not abstract. They shape the possibilities available to people on the ground. That is why the key feature of the LWF's advocacy framework is the "Local to Global to Local" approach. Today, this approach is framed by the LWF's Advocacy Framework 2025–2031, 'Action for Justice and Hope'.

Advocacy starts with people and communities at the local level. Their experiences and concerns are brought to the national and regional levels and then into global political processes, particularly those of the United Nations.

The Lutheran Office for World Community, is the LWF's advocacy presence at United Nations Headquarters in New York. It brings the voices and experiences of member churches and affected communities into UN policy discussions on human rights, migration and refugees, peacebuilding, gender justice and climate justice. Lutheran Office for World Community works with ecumenical, interfaith and civil-society partners to influence global policies and diplomatic processes.

What is decided at the global level should, in turn, make a difference at the local level and contribute to concrete change.

The aim is to promote peace, justice and human rights, while also holding governments and other decision-makers accountable. Advocacy is not only about speaking on behalf of people, but also about empowering them to participate in decision-making processes and to stand up for their rights and interests at different levels.

In this way, LWF advocacy connects local, national, regional and global levels. It engages with governments, Churches and other decision-makers at the local and national levels; with organizations such as the European Union or the African Union at the regional level; and with the United Nations and other international organizations at the global level.

Advocacy is thus a process that connects local experiences with global politics and seeks to translate global decisions into concrete change at the local level.

A recent example of this approach is the LWF's participation in the dialogue with the government of Colombia, the United Nations Migration Network and civil society networks in preparation for, and in shaping the thematic content of, the Global Forum on Migration and Development, or GFMD, which this year took place in Riohacha, Colombia.

This Forum provides a platform for political decision-makers and civil-society actors from around the world to come together and develop broader perspectives on migration.

This year, for example, it saw the launch of the civil society campaign "Resist, Reclaim, Realize: Migrants' rights, are human rights".

The campaign grew out of the experience that the progress formally achieved in recent years

through global agreements recognizing the rights of migrants is increasingly coming into conflict with a reality in which the erosion of fundamental human rights, the growing instrumentalization of xenophobia and anti-migration rhetoric, and violent attacks against migrants are being experienced around the world.

The campaign therefore aims to set the tone for civil society engagement in international governance and migration discourse by reclaiming the language of human rights, and the dignity, humanity and justice of all people on the move.

In its advocacy work, the LWF works closely with other Churches and faith-based organizations. Together, they "can add distinct assets to the work surrounding migration. They are able to relate to people's faith convictions, which play a major role in both decision making and coping with trauma. Their broad outreach and local connectedness through congregational structures enables them to raise awareness on risks surrounding irregular migration in areas with limited access for international organizations or government authorities. In contexts of politicized narratives around migrants and refugees, churches can build upon their moral authority and credibility to speak up for justice and for welcoming the stranger." [SoH]

A particularly important example of advocacy and cooperation across faith communities is the development of the document *Welcoming the Stranger*, which I would like to mention briefly here.

The process began with a dialogue on "Faith and Protection" convened by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in 2012. From this dialogue emerged a broad coalition of faith-based humanitarian organizations and academic institutions worldwide, including HIAS, Islamic Relief Worldwide, Jesuit Refugee Service, the Lutheran World Federation, the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies, Religions for Peace, the University of Vienna Faculty of Roman Catholic Theology, the World Council of Churches, the World Evangelical Alliance and World Vision International.

Together, they developed common affirmations for faith leaders.

The starting point is the common call to "welcome the stranger" through protection and hospitality, and to honor the stranger and people of other faiths with respect and equality. This call is deeply rooted in all major religions.

I have already spoken about the significance of Matthew 25 from a Christian perspective. In the Upanishads, the Sanskrit mantra – "the guest is like God" – expresses the fundamental importance of hospitality in the Hindu tradition. In Buddhism, too, the concept of *karuna* expresses an attitude of tolerance, nondiscrimination, inclusion and empathy for the suffering of others. In Judaism, the experience of the people of Israel through the Exodus and exile shapes a loving attitude towards the stranger. And in Islam, the experience of the Prophet Muhammad, who fled persecution in Mecca, embodies the Islamic model of refugee protection. Across these different religious traditions, we find a similar conviction: the stranger is someone whose dignity calls for protection and hospitality.

The common affirmations make it clear: To welcome the stranger means to resist discrimination. It means taking seriously the causes that force people to flee. It means protecting people from exploitation. It means ensuring access to justice and allowing people to practise their faith freely. And it also means listening deeply, building bridges and speaking out for social justice. This can only succeed when faith leaders take responsibility and encourage their own faith communities to work together with other religious communities, not merely to welcome the stranger, but also to encounter them with respect, dignity and genuine hospitality.

3.2. The World Service – From Survival to Self-Reliance

Advocacy is one way in which the LWF responds to migration. Another is much more immediate: being present with people whose lives have been disrupted by displacement.

The humanitarian work of the LWF began with refugee assistance in Europe after the Second World War. Today, this work is carried out by the LWF World Service, the diaconal arm of the Federation. It works through 18 programmes in 24 countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean. In 2025, it reached 2.8 million people. Fifty-two percent of them were refugees, internally displaced people, and returnees.

This work is rooted in the fundamental conviction I have already described, that every human being has an inherent dignity. Accordingly, the aim of the World Service is not simply to help people survive. It is to help people regain a sense of security, self-reliance, and a perspective for the future.

That distinction is important. Humanitarian work is not only about meeting immediate needs. It is also about restoring people's ability to shape their own lives. This is particularly important when a community is already experiencing poverty or has limited access to water, education, or employment. The arrival of large numbers of refugees can put enormous additional pressure on local resources.

Humanitarian work therefore has to ask two questions at the same time: How do we support those who have been displaced? And how do we strengthen the communities that receive them?

The World Service combines immediate assistance with protection, psychosocial support, education, climate-resilient livelihoods, and social cohesion.

Let me give you a few examples of how this approach takes shape in very different situations.

Jordan: Creating Spaces Where People Can Rebuild Their Lives

Jordan has hosted large numbers of refugees for many years, particularly people who have fled the war in Syria. The LWF has been working there since 2012 and has developed a long-term refugee response that connects its work with refugees and the Jordanian host population

The LWF operates community centres to create safe places for education, counselling, social support and community activities. There is also a childcare facility that allows parents to participate in vocational training while their children are being cared for.

The LWF also supports livelihoods and entrepreneurship. People can receive assistance in developing their own business ideas. Children, young people and women can access protection and psychosocial support.

Through these different forms of support, the LWF seeks to build a form of humanitarian work that does not leave people permanently dependent on assistance, but helps them regain the capacity to shape their own lives.

That is what dignity means in practice.

Chad: Water, Protection and Resilience

The situation in Chad is very different, because here we see the acute dimension of refugee assistance more clearly.

Since the outbreak of war in Sudan in April 2023, hundreds of thousands of people have fled to eastern Chad. The communities receiving them were already among the poorest in the country. They are themselves severely affected by droughts, floods and the consequences of climate change.

The LWF has been working in Chad since 2007 to address these challenges.

One of the most basic needs is water. In newly established refugee settlements, access to water is quite literally a matter of survival. The LWF therefore constructs wells and solar-powered water systems, improves sanitation and distributes hygiene materials.

At the same time, the programme supports longer-term livelihoods, including fish farming, vegetable production and improved livestock management.

Ukraine: Displacement within One's Own Country

The Ukraine programme shows another dimension of displacement. Here, the main focus is not the reception of refugees from another country, but people who have been internally displaced and those who have remained in areas particularly affected by the war.

The LWF established its Ukraine programme in 2022. It first worked in the Chernihiv region, later expanded to Kharkiv, and has been active in Sumy since 2025.

In 2025, more than 20,000 people were directly supported. The programme includes the repair and reconstruction of damaged homes, humanitarian supplies, food and hygiene packages, support for schools and safe learning spaces, psychosocial support for children, parents and teachers, protection measures and support for restoring livelihoods.

Again, the goal is not only to provide assistance. It is to help restore something that war and displacement have taken away: a degree of security, normality and the possibility of planning for tomorrow.

3.3 Symbols of Hope – Department of Theology, Mission and Justice

The next example takes us from humanitarian response to prevention. The Department for Theology, Mission and Justice is responsible for programmes that support the presence and

witness of the LWF member churches.

In the area of migration, this goal is pursued above all through the initiative *Symbols of Hope*, which was developed together with member Churches experiencing significant outward migration, dangerous journeys and reported fatalities at land and sea borders. It began in Ethiopia and Nigeria in 2017 and was extended to Zimbabwe in 2020.

The initiative addresses a difficult reality. For many young people, migration appears to offer a way out of poverty, unemployment or a lack of prospects. If safe and regular pathways are unavailable, they may turn to irregular routes. Along these routes they can become vulnerable to human trafficking, forced labour, sexual exploitation and violence.

Some lose their lives. Some disappear. And some return home carrying not only economic losses, but also trauma and shame. They may feel that they have failed because the migration they had hoped would transform their lives and the lives of their families did not succeed.

In this situation, Symbols of Hope combines raising awareness of the risks of irregular migration with psychosocial support, social reintegration and economic empowerment.

It works with churches, schools, community leaders and other trusted local actors to help people make informed decisions and to create opportunities for them to build a future locally. And it promotes learning and exchange between churches in different countries. By sharing experiences and successful approaches, these churches strengthen one another and contribute to wider advocacy on migration.

The figures give some indication of the scale: 335 returnees and potential migrants have been empowered in Nigeria and Ethiopia; 1,543 returnees have received psychosocial support and trauma healing; around 100,000 people have been informed about irregular migration and human trafficking; and 559 Muslim and Christian leaders have been trained to provide psychosocial support.

The programme is not simply saying: "Do not migrate. It is dangerous." Its deeper purpose is to make the choice to stay a real and possible alternative.

Let me make this concrete with two short stories.

This becomes particularly concrete in the story of Awano Gabore in Ethiopia. Awano was displaced and physically injured. After losing property and family support, he was living with his wife and five children in extreme vulnerable circumstances. Through Symbols of Hope, his children were able to return to school. Awano received business training and start-up support to produce and sell traditional mattresses. His wife began small-scale trading. The family was gradually able to rebuild food security, productive assets and self-reliance.

A similar story comes from Zimbabwe. Shainani Mahuntse had attempted a dangerous undocumented journey to South Africa in 2019 after food insecurity and unaffordable school fees had made life at home extremely difficult. She experienced exploitation and returned in 2021. Through Symbols of Hope, she received training in vegetable gardening, small-scale irrigation

and fish production, together with start-up support. Today she can produce food for her family and earn income for school fees and essential household needs.

And that is why I think the name of the programme is well chosen. It is not simply about giving people information. It is about creating symbols of hope: concrete experiences that tell people that another future is possible.

4. Conclusion: What the Church Can Contribute

The LWF's response begins with a clear conviction: every person on the move bears God-given dignity and must be treated as a person with rights and as an active participant, not as a commodity or a problem to be managed. The LWF seeks to live up to this conviction through its structures and its diverse programmes at different levels.

In all of this, the LWF's distinctive contribution lies in connecting global communion with local presence. Member churches are rooted in communities along migration routes and can mobilize trusted leaders, congregations and institutions. The Communion Office, the World Service, the Lutheran Office for World Community and partner churches add coordination, technical accompaniment, learning and advocacy. Together, they link prevention, protection, psychosocial care, livelihoods, integration and policy engagement across countries of origin, transit, destination and return.

The many examples I have shared show the practical value of this approach. Churches are reaching large audiences with safer-migration information, helping survivors recover and reintegrate, creating livelihood alternatives, strengthening safeguarding and referral systems, and building productive partnerships with public authorities. Individual stories also show that the deepest results are measured in restored dignity, children returning to school, families regaining stability and people discovering viable futures at home.

They are not commodities. They are not problems to be managed. They are not merely numbers. They are people with rights, responsibilities, capacities and hopes.

To remember this in the discussion on migration and to make it the basis of our action is one of the most important contributions that churches can make today.

And this is something we can do together.

We can insist on a language in which realism and humanity belong together. We can speak about the challenges migration creates without making migrants themselves into the problem. We can advocate for responsible policies while defending the dignity of those affected by them. And we can create places where people who have lost almost everything can discover that they have not lost their worth, their rights or their capacity to hope.

This is why I would like to emphasize, in conclusion, how grateful I am for the close cooperation between our two churches on the issue of migration.

One recent example of such cooperation between the Anglican Communion and the Lutheran World Federation is worth mentioning today. In December 2025, LWF Action for Justice worked together with the Anglican Communion on a joint statement reaffirming their commitments to the Global Compact on Refugees and the protection of refugees.

It states: "Refugees lose many things when they leave, but never their human rights, never their God-given dignity, and never their agency to shape a future with hope."

When we work together in this way for the dignity of all people, when we accompany people who are vulnerable, when we defend their dignity and when we work for a future in which they can participate and flourish, we are not simply performing a humanitarian task together.

We are living out our faith together. We are making visible what it means to follow Christ. This is Faith becoming active in love – in very concrete ways, in very different places, and always with the conviction that every human being is created in the image of God.

Thank you.

Bishop Kristina, like all our Presenters, received a little gift from the Society