

# **For the Healing of the Church -- Remembering Who We Are A Presentation to the LWF Pre-Assembly Youth Conference**

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## **Introduction**

I want to thank the organizers and thank you for this opportunity to think with you about the very important question facing us as Christians today – the healing of the church.

Let me begin with two stories. The first story I found while browsing in a book about angels in a small bookshop. A new baby brother had just been born into a young family. As expected the parents were quite overjoyed at the new addition to their household. But their three-year-old daughter seems troubled by the recent arrival. She was continually pestering her mother and father to be left alone with her infant brother. She was so persistent that the parents finally relented but to insure nothing went wrong, they left a small monitoring device in the room so they could listen. When they were alone the young girl gets really close to her new brother and whispers in his ear, “Can you tell me about God. It has been a long time and I think I am forgetting!”

My second story is from Chile. A number of years ago I was part of an observer team that monitored the plebiscite on the constitution that would have allowed General Pinochet to continue as President for Life. Our task was to meet with various community groups, attend as many events as possible and observe the actual voting process to determine if the process was free from interference that would compromise the process. Many of you know of the horrific events that took place in Chile during the Pinochet era. There was a group of Pentecostal seminarians in Santiago that invited us to join them in marching to a political rally that would bring together over 100,000 people from across the country who supported the “No” side in the plebiscite, those opposed to extending Pinochet’s term as President.

As we began to march in the early morning darkness down the desolate streets with a huge banner that read “Pentecostals for the No”, two soldiers in full battle gear with their guns at the ready, suddenly appeared. They took one of the professors aside and down a side alley. As the one soldier – a very young man to be sure – anxiously stood at the end of the alley looking up and down the street, the professor and the other soldier talked. This was a tense moment for the rest of us since many people were taken away – often disappeared – in such encounters. The conversation ended and just as suddenly as they had appeared, the two young men disappeared. I asked the professor what they wanted. He said, “These two young men are Christians – one Protestant the other Catholic – and they saw that we too were Christians and opposed to the government. They want to advise us to go a different way since we would be walking right through a neighbourhood where the police families lived and they thought they might become violent.” Two young men who in spite of great risk to themselves, had not forgotten and indeed in “the moment of trial” (Lord’s Prayer), remembered who they were.

Remembering is our first step on the journey toward the healing of the church. The principalities and powers of the world try to impose on us a different way of understanding of who we are as a community, what we are to do with our life together, and different expectations for the future. Remembering is to be grasped by the immense and unrelenting love of God.

Healing in the church is to reconcile the gulf between what the church is and what the church can be under God's direction. The church is an institution in and of the world but at the same time it is God's sacrament in human history. As a sacramental community gathering for prayer, worship and at the table of our Lord, the church can be a community that models community and that draws others into the life it offers.

At the same time, the church is a community of sinful people with all their imperfections and faults. Human history is littered with countless memories of the church's failing and complicity in injustice. Our own stories no doubt can document in detail, times when we have witnessed exclusion and alienation by a church captive to values, culture, and ideologies not of its own making.

Remembering is our first step on the journey toward the healing gulf between what the church is and what the church can be. Radical remembering can liberate us from our cultural captivity to reclaim and rediscover our vocation as an evangelical community of disciples of Jesus Christ. It is to this aspect of the healing of the church that I wish to share a few thoughts. Let me also acknowledge that I speak from a particular perspective and a particular context that may be different than yours.

### **Living Out Two Competing Stories**

In recent scholarship, a lot of work has been done on the role of narrative – “the master story” – and its relationship to human communities. Scholars suggest that every society has its own master narrative – a primary story. What becomes important for preserving the social cohesiveness and purposefulness of a society, is that its members see a role for themselves in their community's unfolding drama. Often these stories are almost subconscious in the minds of members only surfacing at crucial moments in their life together like times of national celebration or crisis. Such narratives need to engage the people as ‘actors’ in the collective drama.

A friend of mine a number of years ago had an experience that illustrated this when he went to a play. It had been well advertised and seats were in great demand. He arrived early and took his seat. The theatre went dark and two lone actors came on stage. They announced that tonight (as was the case every night for the production) there was to be no audience, just actors. The audience – not that large by design actually -- was invited onto the stage where they participated fully in the unfolding fictionalized plot. When I asked how he enjoyed the play, “It was terrific, the best performance I ever attended!” he said. What made the difference was that he saw himself as an actor not a spectator.

The master narratives of our communities and our world are not fiction but like my friends experience, they are powerful, compelling and engage us. They offer us what is crucial to our

common life – structures of life, meaning and purpose that define who we are, that drive us to do what we must do, and that provide a destination for our social projects.

With apologies, this is a much-abbreviated summary of this important work. For our purposes here what is important about these master narratives is that people are connected to the primary story of their communities. There are all sorts of consequences when they are not or when the master narrative of one community comes in conflict with those of other communities. Certainly the fact that today military spending is \$812 billion and there are some 35 regional wars bringing death and suffering to millions is just some of the sad evidence of such consequences.

Christians too share their own unique master narrative in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is master narrative that spans the globe and by the year 2025 will have the support of some 2.6 billion people with the majority living in Africa, Latin America and Asia.<sup>1</sup> It is a master narrative that we re-enact whenever we are linked in prayer, gather for worship, are reborn in the waters of baptism and gather at the common table to eat the bread and drink from the cup. It is a narrative that has its roots in God's history with the people of Israel. It is a narrative that is expressed in the world in the communion of faithful we call the church – what the Lutheran World Federation has come to call the “communio.” It is a power-filled narrative that has conferred on Christians down through the centuries a profound sense of who we are, what is expected of us as disciples of Jesus Christ, and God's destination for our life. It is a master narrative – a primary story – of hope.

It was certainly a master narrative that informed the life of the early church. The American sociologist, Rodney Stark has documented this in a very vivid way in a book entitled, The Rise of Christianity.<sup>2</sup> Stark argues that you cannot explain the rapid exponential growth of Christianity by the traditional view of evangelism alone. Between 40 CE and 350 CE, the number of Christians grew by 40 percent per decade making them a majority (56.5%) of the population. Using sociological comparisons, Stark argues that Christians embodied a different way of life. In contrast to the pagan culture of the Empire, Christian communities respected women, they ministered to the sick and dying during the two great plagues (165 CE and 251 CE) which resulted in the death of between one quarter and one third of the population, and they were an ‘oasis of community’ in the rapidly growing cities that were swelling as the rural crisis forced people off their land and into the impersonal world of crowded urban centers.

This leads Stark to conclude that Christianity grew because “. . . Christians constituted an intense community, able to generate ‘invincible obstinacy’ that . . . yielded immense religious rewards.”<sup>3</sup> These early Christians saw themselves as actors (i.e. disciples) in the master Gospel narrative. They understood themselves as different from the pagan culture around them. These early Christians lived an ethic that sought to include people from outside their own communities. Theirs was a story characterized by service to others that led many in that time to say “See how they love one another.” This stood in stark contrast to the master narrative and ethic of the

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<sup>1</sup> Phillip Jenkins, “The Next Christianity,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 2002, p.p. 53-68.

<sup>2</sup> Rodney Stark, The Rise of Christianity, How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in A Few Centuries (Harper Collins, San Francisco, 1997)

<sup>3</sup> Stark, p.208.

empire, which was characterized by the pursuit of power and self-interest and resulted in the domination and exclusion of millions.

There are certainly parallels to our own time. The same master narrative Empire with its imperial ethic is tragically present and shaping the course of human events. The pursuit of power and self-interest and the ensuing domination and exclusion of millions seem to be defining characteristics of the new world disorder. Human sinfulness has conspired with the *principalities and powers* of the world to build divisions and walls that separate people and communities by wealth, by employment, by race, by gender, by sexual orientation, by nationality, by political party, by caste or tribe, or even by the sports team you support, or by clothing fashion you wear, or the music you enjoy. Whether out of ignorance, selfishness, or fear, this imperial ethic places “me” at the center and makes others and even creation itself, objects and the means for my gratification. Many of you have experienced these divisions and barriers in your own lives.

While we may be horrified but the degree to which the principalities and powers will go to preserve this master narrative of domination and death where people are forgotten, communities destroyed, and creation devastated, we increasingly are not surprised. In the face of the human indignity, injustice, violence and selfishness, we can well identify with the billboard on a road not too far from here that reads in bold letters, “Don’t make me come down there! God.” Fortunately for us, God has already come down here and continues to live among us. In the master Gospel narrative, the Cross of Jesus has brought healing to the divisions between God and people and among people.

The problem is that the principalities and powers of the world with their narrative of Empire relentlessly seek to domesticate and tame the Church’s proclamation of the master Gospel narrative. Many Christians struggle to be part of the two stories at the same time. It may work for a while. It is not particularly hard because there is a lot in the narrative of empire that is appealing. And there is some good that can come to us. And it is necessary at times to reach an accommodation with narrative of empire as Jesus well knew in suggesting that we render unto Caesar that which belongs to Caesar and to God that which belongs to God.

The Church has over the centuries has reached just such accommodations. Christians too have engaged in such compromises. But trying to be an ‘actor’ in two different stories weakens the connection to the primary story – the Gospel story. And the church can begin to forget.

### **Remembering the Gospel Story**

Remembering is our first step on the journey toward healing gulf between what the Church has become in its accommodation with the narrative of empire and what the church can be as it seeks to live out the master Gospel narrative. Remembering for the community of the faithful begins when the Crisis of Misery and/or the Crisis of Meaning confront the church.

The Crisis of Misery, like the Crisis of Meaning, exposes the failure of the master narrative of Empire. This crisis may be more obvious in some ways because we can see it and we can hear the cries of those dying and in distress. We can witness the Crisis of Misery in growing levels

of hunger and poverty that see 1.2 billion people living on less than \$1 per day, that sees some 54 countries poorer today than a decade ago, in imposition of economic restructuring by international financial institutions that have forced cuts to health, education and food security programs, in the spread of preventable diseases, in the widening pandemic that sees 45 million people living with HIV/Aids, in a world that has seen 150 million people killed in wars during the last century and 100 million more die at the hands of their own repressive governments, in a world that sees the extinction of 20,000 species of life each year and where the exponential increase greenhouse gas emissions is threatening the world with catastrophic weather patterns. It is a crisis not only confined to poorer nations but can be seen the growing poverty in the midst of the affluent communities as well. And it is a crisis whose consequences fall largely on women.

For the Church, the Crisis of Misery slaps us in the face with the realization of what we have known, that the grand human project born of the master narrative of Empire is not working. This failure starkly challenges the churches to remember and to respond. Many of the churches in poorer nations and communities understand well the turbulent currents of this dynamic. They are remembering what God requires of us all, many are responding to the human consequences of an imperial ethic of death and destruction and they have much to teach the church.

The Crisis of Meaning too exposes the failing of the narrative of Empire and its imperial ethic of domination. However, it is not as readily apparent nor does it seem as urgent. The crisis of meaning reveals itself in the exhaustion of relentless consumption, in the loneliness and widespread alienation that many experience in their families, schools and workplaces, in the demanding pace of work that leads to stress related diseases of affluence like heart disease and cancer, in the cynicism and suspicion toward political, social and religious institutions, in the rampant distrust of others, in the lack of satisfaction with work or employment, and in the increasing fatalism that asserts the nothing can be done to make things better. The promises of increased 'prosperity' or the "good life" have not delivered fulfillment. As the old Jewish proverb says, "When there is too much, something is missing."

For the Church, the Crisis of Meaning subtly infects our life like a cold or virus with the realization that something is not right and all is not well. This is notably a crisis of affluence but not solely so. It confronts the church, but churches are struggling to understand its consequences and what is required of them. Some seek to ignore it preferring that the church be a safe-haven from the world. Some are discouraged by it and look for other organizations, religious experiences, or diversions in which to invest themselves.

In your Pre-Assembly Reports from the Regional Consultations you have identified many of the symptoms of the crisis of misery and the crisis of meaning.

This week as you live together and talk about the theme "For the Healing of the World," you may well want to ask, "How is it that these twin crisis confront you, confront your church and confront the Federation?" You may also want to challenge yourself to listen more deeply to your brothers and sisters to understand the suffering they are facing and how they are responding or the alienation they are experiencing and what they need to find. Both are often at the heart of the divisions and disunity that plague the church's life.

These twin crises, Misery and Meaning, force us as church to remember our place in God's master narrative of liberation and redemption and our place in the unfolding story of Jesus. God's master narrative does not call us to abandon the world but to engage the world in a radically new way. And herein lies the key for the healing of the church. As the crisis of misery and meaning converge in our experiences together as a global family, God offers us the possibility of healing the divide between what the Church is when it lives by the narrative of Empire and what the Church can be when it reclaims and rediscovers what it means to live out God's Gospel narrative.

### **Reclaiming and Rediscovering Our Place in God's Story**

This challenge is not new. The people of Israel too struggled continually against forgetting who they were as God's people. The Jews of Jesus day had developed a reputation for tenaciously and vigorously defending their identity against those that would be imposed on them by the successive empires whether Assyrian, Babylonian, Greek or Roman. In Jesus time, Galilee, Judea and Samaria were hotbeds of rebellion and resistance against the alien power of Rome and those collaborators who sought to impose a foreign identity on God's people.<sup>4</sup> Those who followed Jesus vigorously struggled to maintain their connection and their part in God's unfolding story of liberation and salvation, which often brought them into conflict with the principalities and powers of the empire of their day.

If the healing required for the church is to reclaim and rediscover its place in God's master narrative of liberation and redemption, how can we be actors not merely spectators in God's great story? What do we need to do?

Our God is a God of surprises and it is this God of surprises that directs our journey of remembering and rediscovery. Through the Holy Spirit God surprises us with opportunity for discipleship. Our efforts to remember must not take the form of a new "works righteousness" where we seek to the authours of our own restoration. Such efforts reflect the ethic of the Imperial narrative. Rather we need to be open to the moments of Kairos, those unplanned and surprising moments of challenge and opportunity for ministry. In the accounts of Jesus ministry, many of the important moments must have seemed unplanned and spontaneous to his followers – meeting a tax collector on the street, blessing the children, cleansing lepers, encountering the woman at the well, discussions with the rich young ruler. In we think about our own experiences with ministry, most of them are the unplanned encounters when we are surprised by kairotic moments of grace.

In many of his teachings, Jesus warns us to be "watchful", to stay "awake", to be open to the surprising moments of God. The world can keep us busy, distracted and preoccupied. So too in the church, we can be busy. But motion is not ministry. To be watchful, awake and open to the Holy Spirit's surprises, we need to be what I would call a "Three D" Church – a church that welcomes and encourages diversity, a church that is active in discerning the "signs of the time", and a church that is marked by diakonia (service to others).

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<sup>4</sup> See Richard A. Horsley, Jesus and Empire, The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2003)

Let me explain briefly what I mean by a “Three D” Church of Diversity, Discernment, and Diakonia.

## **Diversity**

We are all unique unrepeatable miracles of God’s creating. No two of us is alike and no two of us thinks or acts exactly alike. We come from communities shaped and sustained by God that look, feel and sound very different but share the common bond of faith in Jesus Christ. Where the world often fears the unknown “other,” we in the family of faith need to embrace the foreigner and the stranger. Martin Luther King Jr. once wrote, “I cannot be fully who I am unless you are fully who you are and You cannot be fully who you are unless I am fully who I am”

What King knew is that in our encounter with others—particularly those who are very different from us -- we discover more about who we really are. Being in a different place, helps us know more about what is important about our home. Being in a different culture, helps us know better our own culture. Encounters with people of other faiths, helps us understand our faith better. Many of you will learn much about yourself during this Assembly in your encounters with people from many diverse communities around the globe. Diversity helps us know who we are but it also shapes who we are and expands and deepens what we are able to see and know.

Just as encounters in diversity help broaden our self-understanding, so too embracing such encounters in the Church broadens our communal self-understanding. Let me illustrate with a couple examples. To Lutherans, ‘justification by faith’ is a central theological pillar. For quite some time, there was an assumption that we all held the same view on its meaning. Gregory Baum, a Canadian Roman Catholic theologian, recently reviewed some of the currents of Lutheran theology only to discover a rich diversity of interpretations concerning justification.<sup>5</sup> Baum suggests that there are at least six different theological approaches to justification all of which claim fidelity to the Lutheran tradition. He observes that “. . .all Christian churches that constitute world-wide communities find themselves challenged by Christian voices that represent experiences and reflections belonging to different cultures and different historical locations.”<sup>6</sup> Such global diversity can help bring to light dimensions previously overlooked because of the assumptions that we made about them.

In Canada, churches with often-different theological views have worked jointly on issues of justice and peace through a variety of ecumenical coalitions (now known as Kairos – Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives) as well as the Canadian Council of Churches. Canadian churches have also worked with other faith communities – Jewish, Buddhist, Muslim and others. What is interesting is that rather than reaching an agreement on theological questions first, churches embraced the very diversity that separates many of these communities and agreed to work together on compelling issues of human rights, economic and social justice, aboriginal rights, environmental sustainability, corporate social responsibility and peace. In that process, they discovered more about their own theology and at the same time provided a powerful common witness to the unity of the church.

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<sup>5</sup> Gregory Baum, “Critical Theology in the Lutheran Tradition,” *The Ecumenist* Volume 38, No. 4, Fall 2001

<sup>6</sup> Baum, p. 2.

If the healing of the church involves being more watchful, awake and open to God's surprises, the Church needs not only to welcome but it also needs to encourage diversity to help it remember the parts of God's story that might be overlooked.

## **Discernment**

The second element of a 3-D church is discernment. It is interesting that many who come to Jesus ask for a 'sign' to confirm that he is the Messiah, the anointed one. Jesus is dismissive of such requests – no sign will be given (see for example Matthew 12:39, 16:4). But Jesus also challenges his followers to be discerning of the signs of the times – "Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name . . . (see for example Matthew 24:3 and Mark 13:4). We are called to 'beware' and to see and understand the world differently.

What you see, however, depends on where you are standing. If you are standing on the top of a very tall building and you look down at an accident on the street below, the people look so small and unrecognizable. But if you are standing on the street you experience the accident up close. You anguish with those who are suffering and hurt. There is a bond of solidarity. Christians do not see the world through imperial lenses or from those high places of power, fortune and fame. In contrast, Christians need to be standing in those places where humanity and creation are suffering. Today many of you are in those places as are countless other Christians. Seeing the world up close compels us to ask the difficult questions. Discernment is to ask the tough justice questions about our world; Why is this happening? Who is suffering and why? Who benefits and who pays? Who is left out or forgotten? What needs to be done?

Jesus tells us we must have the "eyes to see" and the "ears to hear" (see Matthew 13:16). Discernment is the process by which we diagnose what is happening and begin to understand the dynamics of the world. It is something we must do in an ongoing way as a community and involve people with varying expertise and knowledge. It is a process that identifies what justice requires and how peace can be achieved.

Discernment is not utopian or unrealistic. Often critics level just such an accusation that is not accurate. For example, when there was a flagrant disregard for human rights in Central America during the 1980s, governments often relied on the analysis and documentation of the churches in making assessments of what was happening in that region. Informally, members of a Canadian Parliamentary Committee noted that this was often more reliable and comprehensive information than what they received through official government channels. And again during the years of Apartheid and the occupation of Namibia, the churches helped the public understand and governments like those of Canada to act. One former Member of Parliament and Cabinet Minister has credited Lutherans in Canada with putting the occupation of Namibia on the national political agenda during those Apartheid years. Certainly you too can cite similar examples.

If the healing of the church involves being more watchful, awake and open to God's surprises, the Church needs to vigilantly engage in discerning the signs of the times. Discernment helps us to see and understand those moments of Kairos, moments of challenge and opportunity, for mission and ministry.



## **Diakonia**

The third element of a 3-D church is ‘diakonia’ or what is sometimes called social ministry. At Seminary, we had a professor who on every occasion possible reminded us all that we should “Never become so heavenly minded that we were no earthly good.” Diakonia is our unconditional service to our neighbour. It is what the Samaritan did for the helpless victim of robbers on the road to Jericho. (Luke 10:30) It is central to what it means to be Christian and what it means to be Church. It is what the church is doing today in thousands of communities – your communities – around the world.

Fundamentally diakonia is about embodying an ethic of inclusion. Diakonia inevitably is about change -- social change. Diakonia, as Rodney Stark who I mentioned earlier pointed out, which so characterized the witness of early Christians, even has the power to change empires. It is about breaking down divisions and barriers. It is about removing the walls and opening upon the wonderful tent of whole of creation (the oikos) so that more people will be welcomed and brought into the abundant life it offers. It is the recognition that No one is anyone without everyone and “Nothing is anything without everything else.”<sup>7</sup> Diakonia is about the doing of justice.

Much has been written about diakonia and the LWF did host a consultation in November 2002 in South Africa. What is important for our consideration here is how diakonia helps the church to be watchful, awake and open to God’s surprises for ministry in at least two ways.

Diakonia is doing and as such makes us ‘actors.’ I remember a story told about a Seminary Professor who had lost his son to a tragic illness at a young age. His death had shook the community and had devastated his father. His son had been his pride and joy. His colleagues and students could not understand how he could cope with such a loss. They marveled at his faith. They asked him how he could continue. In response he said, “When I have moments of deepest doubt and despair, I get up and preach the Gospel.” Diakonia is much like this. It is remembering by doing. In the doing – even when we don’t feel up to the task – we rediscover ourselves on the stage of God’s story once again.

Secondly, the doing of diakonia puts us into places and among people where the church can hear again the Gospel. Diakonia is the journey of a pilgrim church that ventures to the margins of the world. Diakonia recognizes a “preferential attentiveness” the church must give to this special witness of marginalized people to speak the Gospel to the Church itself. The Gospel most often comes from the margins of society. Can we hear these voices – not just in their physical need as desperate as that can be– but in the Word of liberation and redemption that they speak to the wider community of the faithful?

If the healing of the church involves being more watchful, awake and open to God’s surprises, through diakonia the church can find itself in those places of surprise. It is about doing justice

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<sup>7</sup> This quote has been attributed the Lutheran theologian Larry Rasmussen in referring to the interconnectedness of all life in Creation.

and inclusion is what defines justice. Diakonia is what Jesus looks like to many people. It is what love of God and love of neighbour look like when there are millions of neighbours to love.

A 3-D church that welcomes diversity, that struggles to discern, and that engages the world through diakonia enables us to be watchful, awake and open. It means that we are actively engaged in remembering not merely “hanging around.”

### **When healing happens – Some conclusions**

Healing for the Church, as I am suggesting, is about rediscovering again and again our place in the master story of God’s liberation, redemption and salvation through Jesus Christ. The Cross of Jesus Christ shatters the great temptation to live by the master narrative of an imperial ethic that seeks power over others rather than solidarity with others. Healing for the church happens when the crisis of misery and the crisis of meaning converge and confront the church with its impossible efforts to live by two master stories. And as a result enables us to actively watch for the ways God surprises us with opportunities to be the people of God.

There is a certain ambiguous quality to this understanding of healing for the church. In the past we often spoke of the Reformation principle – the church reforming continually itself. Healing may be a better metaphor in these turbulent times. Radical remembering may liberate the church from the master narrative of empire and in the solidarity that emerges from this kind of healing, express a more humane unity for the church. Such healing for the church will not be easy for the web of our entanglements is complex and the memories and histories are deep and long.

This leaves us with the question of what this means for you as the youth delegates to this Assembly. Your regional reports capture many of the dilemmas we face and you offer a number of good ideas to discuss and which need to be heard. In the discussions here and in Winnipeg, there are some questions you may wish to ask and some temptations you might try to avoid.

Among the important questions you might ask and might ask of the church;

- Where are the frontiers or the margins to which the church must journey?
- Who is being forgotten and who needs to be heard?
- What does the narrative of empire look like for your community?
- What does God’s story of liberation and redemption mean in your community?
- How has God surprised you and your church with opportunities?
- What is your vision for what the church can be?
- What are the signs of the times that should trouble us as Christians?
- What would it mean to expand our encounters between cultures and between faiths?
- Where are the places justice and peace are needed and what does that require of the Church?

There are also temptations to avoid. There will be the temptation to be preoccupied with the business and mechanics of the institution of the Federation or the respective churches, rather than building on your strength as youth as a global movement within the church that can bring vitality and passion to animate the church’s life. There is the temptation to maintain harmony and avoid

controversial issues, rather than discusses them in the spirit of mutual respect and honest inquiry after the truth. And there will be a temptation to despair at the vast challenges facing God's world rather than recognizing those moments of great hope when God's future reign of justice and peace breaks in upon our present world.

The noted American writer and Noble Peace Prize Laureate, Elie Wiesel is reported to have been fond of telling a story about the ancient city of Sodom, well known for its wickedness. He tells of a young man who visited the city and saw an old man who preached quite publicly about the evil present in that city. At first people listened to his message. Eventually however, they began to ridicule and mock him. Eventually, the younger man asked the old man why he continued after all these years. "Originally I preached so I could change the world," said the old man, "but now I rail against the world so that the world will not change me!"

Healing the Church is about being changed not by the world but by God, remembering and rediscovering who we are so that we might be able under the Spirit's guidance, to bring healing and change to the world God loves.

Thank you and may God bless your deliberations.