

PREPARATORY MEETING FOR THE 15th SESSION OF THE LUTHERAN- ORTHODOX JOINT COMMISSION – COMMUNIQUE

Bethlehem, Palestine, 25-31 May 2010

COMMUNIQUE

In preparation for the 15th session of the International Joint Lutheran-Orthodox Commission, the Preparatory Committee met in Bethlehem, Palestine, 25-31 May 2010, under the auspices of His Beatitude Patriarch Theophilos III of Jerusalem. This meeting continued the new phase in the Commission's theological work begun in Reykjavik, Iceland, in 2009.

At its 14th plenary meeting in Paphos, Cyprus, in 2008, the Commission decided to continue its work to "the Mystery of the Church" by focusing on "the Nature and Attributes of the Church" in 2009 and on "the Mission of the Church in 2010. The meeting in Palestine was to explore this second subject and to prepare a draft of a Common Statement on the topic for consideration at the next plenary session.

The meeting was chaired by the Co-Presidents H.E. Metropolitan Prof. Dr Gennadios of Sassima, Ecumenical Patriarchate, and Bishop Dr Donald McCoid, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) was represented by Bishop Dr Manas Buthelezi, South Africa; Revd Dr Stephanie Dietrich, Norway; Dekan Klaus Schwarz, Germany; Revd Prof. Dr Risto Saarinen, Finland (*unable to come*); Revd Prof. Dr Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, Institute for Ecumenical Research, Strasbourg, France (Consultant); and Prof. Dr Kathryn L. Johnson, LWF, Geneva, Switzerland (Co-Secretary). From the

Orthodox Churches the members were H.E. Dr Metropolitan Makarios of Kenya, (Patriarchate of Alexandria, *unable to come*); the V. Revd Protopresbyter Prof. Dr. George Dion Dragas (Patriarchate of Jerusalem); the V. Revd Archimandrite Dr Cyril Hovorun (Patriarchate of Moscow); the V. Revd Prof. Dr Viorel Ionita (Patriarchate of Romania); Prof. Dr Christos Voulgaris (Church of Greece), and the Revd Deacon Theodoros Meimaris, Ecumenical Patriarchate (Co-Secretary).

The Committee discussed its topic with the help of papers prepared by Revd Stephanie Dietrich, Dekan Klaus Schwarz, H.E. Metropolitan Makarios, V. Revd Archimandrite Cyril Hovorun and V. Revd Viorel Ionita.

Discussion of these papers identified broad areas of agreement between the two traditions on the subject of mission and also a number of differences and open questions. A Statement was drafted which will help the Joint Plenary meeting in 2011. In this draft paper the Committee discussed the various aspects of mission, from a Lutheran and an Orthodox understanding, always based upon their traditions and ecclesiastical and doctrinal teachings. Subjects examined in the Statement include "God's Mission and the Church's Mission," "Mission and the Unity of the Church," Mission as Witness (*Martyria*) and Proclamation," "Mission and Diakonia," "and "The Problems of Proselytism and Imperialism."

The members met in Bethlehem, the very place of Jesus Christ's birth in Holy Land. At the opening session, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch, His Beatitude Theophilos III of Jerusalem addressed the Committee, very warmly welcoming the participants and bestowing upon them the patriarchal blessing and wish for a very successful outcome results. He said:

It is significant that, in the course of these particular deliberations, you have made your first pilgrimage as a Joint Commission to the land in which the Church was first revealed, and just a few days after we have celebrated the Feast of

Pentecost, the coming of the "Paraclete," the Spirit of Christ...As the oldest continuous institution in the Holy Land, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem takes seriously our vocation of diakonia both to all those, regardless of religious, ethnic or cultural origin, who make this region their home, as well as to all those, of whatever religious affiliation, who come here throughout the year as pilgrims. In this ministry of diakonia to humankind and for the sake of the unity of all Christians, we extend to you our appreciation and encouragement.

On behalf of the Committee, Metropolitan Gennadios and Bishop McCoid expressed to the Patriarch Theophilos their deep thanks and gratitude for his generous hospitality. They recognized that it is for all a special blessing to hold this meeting in the Holy Land and in Bethlehem in particular, a place where Christianity found its beginning in Christ's Incarnation and birth. They also expressed their anxiety and sadness about the still unresolved political situation for the Palestinians, and for the wall which still exists, separating peoples and nations. The Committee affirmed the Patriarch's observation that the hope is in the Holy Land to be two states with three hearts and inspirations, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism.

On the final day, Bishop Manib Younan of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land, the LWF member church in the Middle East, warmly welcomed the members of the Committee to the Holy Land. He spoke about his vision for the mission of the Church in this place. He highlighted three aspects: the importance of education as a form of resistance to the growing attractions of extremism; the role of ecumenical cooperation for Christian communities who live in the midst of Jews and Muslims; and the centrality of justice. He urged the group to support the strength of groups like the Middle East Council of Churches in their efforts for reconciliation. His remarks were received with warm appreciation by the Committee.

Through a number of visits the Committee was able to learn

about the continuing faithful witness (*martyria*) of Christian communities in the Holy Land. In Bethlehem, the participants paid a visit to the Orthodox Monastery of the Basilica of Nativity of Christ and were generously received by the Abbot H.E. Archbishop Theophylaktos of Jordan. On Friday 28 May the Commission attended a Divine Liturgy in the place of the Nativity Church co-celebrated by Metropolitan Gennadios and Archbishop Theophylaktos, with the other Orthodox members. They also visited the International Center of Bethlehem, whose "Lutheran-based ecumenically-oriented" mission is to provide help and assistance in difficult circumstances through projects in the arts, education, and health and wellness. |

On the way to Jerusalem, the Commission visited the Monasteries of Saint Savva the Sanctified, of Saint Theodosios the Blessed, and of the Magi. In Jerusalem they visited sites on the Mount of Olives, the Holy Sion, and other holy sites. On Sunday the members attended the Divine Liturgy at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and visited the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem.

The Joint Commission will be hosted **31 May – 7 June 2011** by the Lutheran World Federation. At this meeting the Committee will celebrate its 30th anniversary since its beginning.

Bethlehem, Palestine, 29 May 2010.