

Using bowls of olive oil from the Holy Land, congregants in a special "Service of Repentance" made the sign of the cross on each other's hands. © LWF/Arni Danielsson

Action on the Legacy of Lutheran Persecution of "Anabaptists"

Note: Below is the statement approved by the Council of The Lutheran World Federation in Chavannes de Bogis (Geneva) in October 2009 and adopted at the VIIth Plenary Session of the LWF Eleventh Assembly on 22 July 2010

When Lutherans today realize the history of Lutheran – Anabaptist relationships in the sixteenth century and beyond as it is presented in the report of the Lutheran – Mennonite International Study Commission, they are filled with a deep sense of regret and pain over the persecution of Anabaptists by Lutheran authorities and especially over the fact that Lutheran reformers theologically supported this persecution. Thus, The Lutheran World Federation, A Communion of Churches wishes to express publicly its deep regret and sorrow.

Trusting in God who in Jesus Christ was reconciling the world to himself, we ask for forgiveness—from God and from our Mennonite sisters and brothers—for the harm that our forbears in the sixteenth century committed to Anabaptists, for forgetting or ignoring this persecution in the intervening centuries, and for all inappropriate, misleading and hurtful portraits of Anabaptists and Mennonites made by Lutheran authors, in both popular and scholarly forms, to the present day.

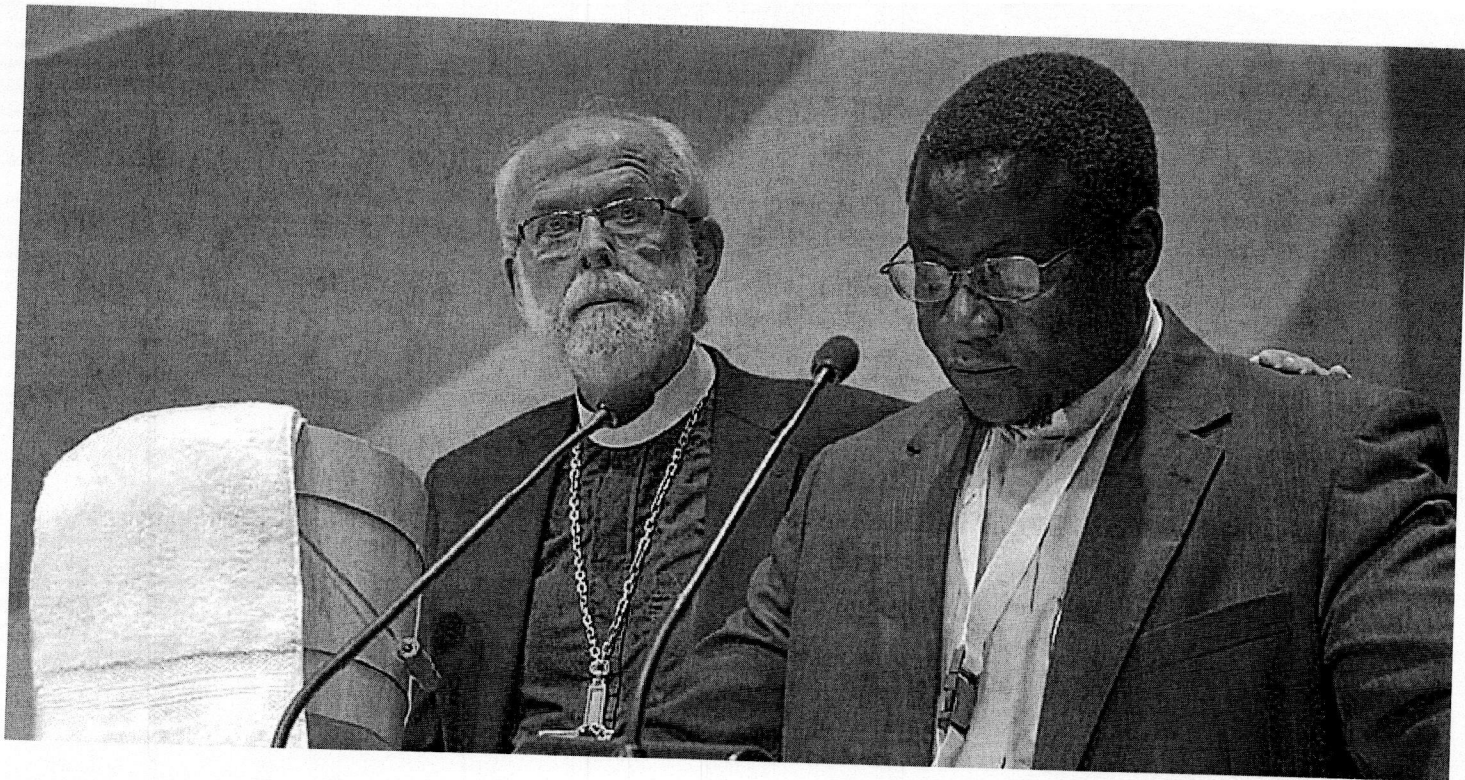
We pray that God may grant to our communities a healing of our memories and reconciliation.

We commit ourselves:

- to interpret the Lutheran Confessions in light of the jointly described history between Lutherans and Anabaptists;

- to take care that this action of the LWF will bear fruit in the teaching of the Lutheran Confessions in the seminaries and other educational activities of our member churches;
- to continue the exploration of unresolved issues between our two traditions, in particular baptism and relations of Christians and of the Church to the state, in an atmosphere of mutual openness and the willingness to learn from each other;
- to affirm the present consensus, gained by the experience of our churches over the centuries, in repudiating the use of the state's power either to exclude or enforce particular religious beliefs; and to work towards upholding and maintaining freedom of religion and conscience in political orders and societies, and
- to urge our international bodies, member churches, and in particular our congregations, to seek ways to continue and deepen relations with the Mennonite World Conference and with local Mennonite communities through common prayer and Bible study, shared humanitarian engagement, and common work for peace.

Recommended by the LWF Council, October 2009, for approval by the LWF Eleventh Assembly, July 2010.



Mennonite World Conference Response to the Lutheran World Federation Action on the Legacy of Lutheran Persecution of Anabaptists

Given by President Danisa Ndlovu (photo, right)

Martin Luther and the Anabaptists called this practice of the early Christians the “rule of Christ.” We find it in Matthew 18, one of only two places in the New Testament where Jesus uses the word *ecclesia*—“church.” Both times his subject is “binding and loosing.” More specifically, in this instance, Jesus teaches about granting forgiveness while reestablishing communion in the community of disciples.

“Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Jesus

said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy times seven’” (Matthew 18:18-22 NRSV).

Today in this place, we together—Lutherans and Anabaptist-Mennonites—are fulfilling the “rule of Christ.”

Today in this place, we together—Lutherans, Anabaptist-Mennonites, and other Christians—are living out a basic and essential meaning of church: binding and loosing; seeking and granting forgiveness; restoring and healing relationships in the body of Christ.

To God be the glory!

Trusting in God who in Jesus Christ was reconciling the world to himself, you have taken this action on the legacy of the persecution of

Anabaptists in which you ask for forgiveness from God and from Anabaptist-Mennonite sisters and brothers. You seek forgiveness:

- for the harm that your forbears in the sixteenth century committed to Anabaptists;
- for forgetting or ignoring this persecution in the intervening centuries; and
- for all inappropriate, misleading and hurtful portraits of Anabaptists and Mennonites made by Lutheran authors to the present day.

Are we worthy to receive your request? We are painfully aware of our own inadequacy.

We cannot bring ourselves to this table with heads held high. We can only come bowed down in great humility and in the fear of the Lord. We cannot come to this point and fail to see our own sinfulness. We cannot come to this point without recognizing our own need for God's grace and forgiveness.

At the same time, we are profoundly moved by your spirit of repentance and by your act of seeking forgiveness. And we remember the prayer of George Blaurock, the first Anabaptist—baptized on January 21, 1525, in Zurich (Switzerland); burned at the stake on September 6, 1529, in Klausen (Austria).

While in prison Blaurock wrote these words:

I sincerely pray for all my enemies, O Lord, however many there may be. Do not lay their sins to their charge. Lord, I entreat this according to your will.

We believe that God has already heard and granted this Anabaptist prayer. We believe that today God has heard your confession and is granting your appeal for forgiveness. We joyfully and humbly join with God in giving forgiveness. In the spirit of the "rule of Christ," we believe that what we are doing together here today on earth, God is doing also in heaven.

To God be the glory!

Trusting in God who in Jesus Christ was reconciling the world to himself, not only have you sought forgiveness for past acts, you have demonstrated the integrity of your initiative by making specific commitments to new action. We gratefully acknowledge these commitments. In response:

- We commit ourselves to promote interpretations of the Lutheran-Anabaptist story

which take seriously the jointly described history found in the Lutheran-Mennonite International Study Commission Report;

- We commit ourselves to take care that your initiative for reconciliation is known and honoured in Anabaptist-Mennonite teaching about Lutherans;
- We commit ourselves to continue with you deliberation on the unresolved issues between our two traditions, in a spirit of mutual vulnerability and openness to the movement of the Spirit;
- We commit ourselves to encourage our member churches, their local congregations, and their institutions to seek fuller relations and greater cooperation with Lutherans in service to the world.

To God be the glory!

During the Last Supper, Jesus said to his disciples:

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35).

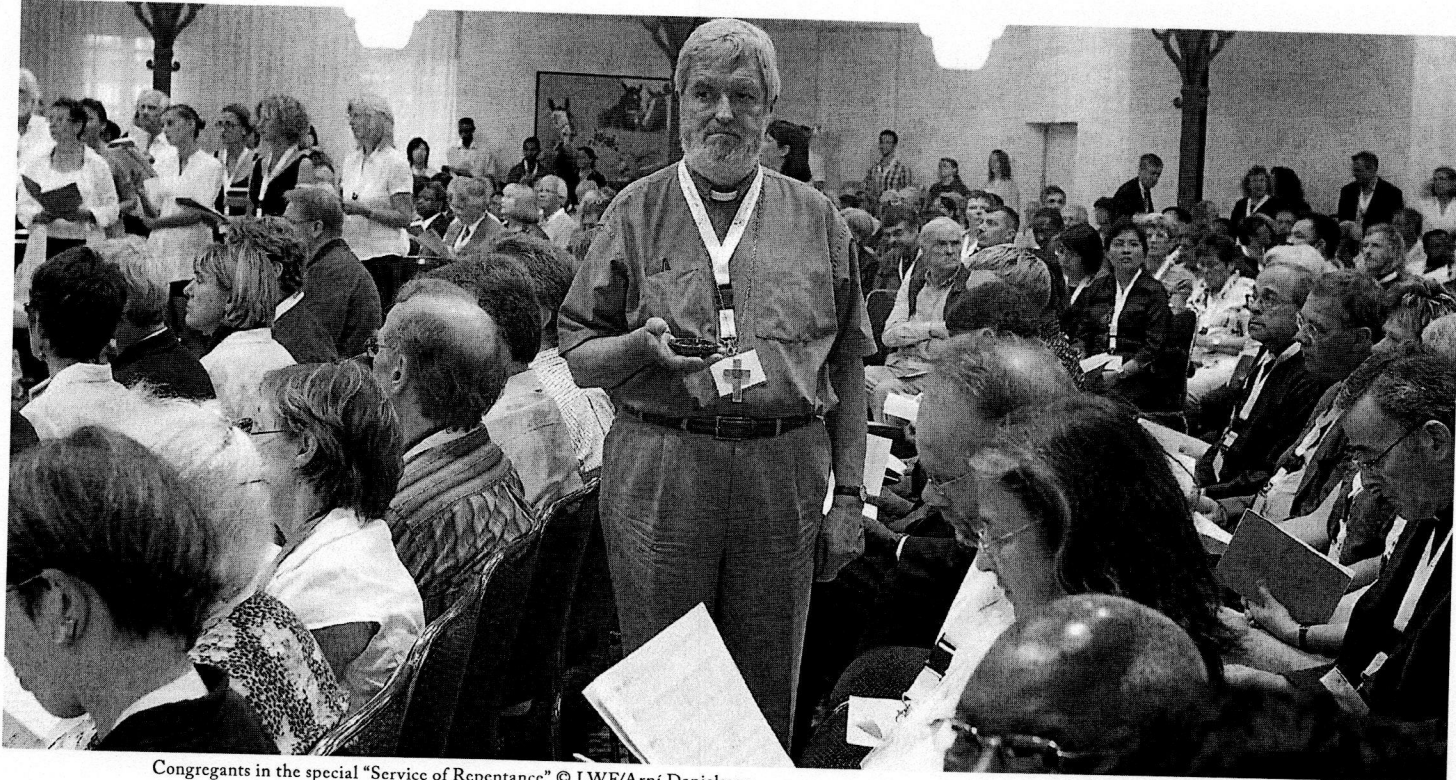
He also gave them a physical, embodied demonstration of this new commandment:

"Jesus (...) got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him" (John 13:3-5).

Some Anabaptist and Mennonite churches have maintained the practice of foot washing. This wooden foot washing tub comes from one of them. We offer it to you as a sign of our commitment to a future when the distinguishing mark of Lutheran and Anabaptist-Mennonite relationships is boundless love and unfailing service. We will learn to seek one another's good from a posture of voluntary and mutual submission. For it is in our vulnerability to one another that God's miraculous, transforming, reconciling presence is made visible in the world.

To God be the glory!

Mennonite World Conference
22 July 2010
Stuttgart, Germany



Congregants in the special "Service of Repentance" © LWF/Arni Danielsson

Service of Repentance

THE COSTS OF PERSECUTION
AND ITS LEGACIES

TESTIMONY 1:
FRIEDER BOLLER, CHAIRPERSON,
ASSOCIATION OF MENNONITE
ASSEMBLIES IN GERMANY

Barbara Unger was a young mother of four children. With others, she chose to be baptized in 1529. That was her YES to following Jesus and her YES to living with brothers and sisters in visible community. They wanted to be a community incarnating the Body of Christ—where daily life demonstrated the practical effects of justice, non-violence and love of their neighbor.

She and the others who were baptized were prepared for what might come.

"Anyone who wants to be a proper Christian must leave behind all they possess and suffer persecution until death" they were warned.

No, martyrdom was neither sought nor glorified at the time. It was only lived and accepted as the unavoidable consequence of their witness. That was rooted in the confidence: "Who will separate us from the love of Christ" (Rom 8:35)?

Barbara Unger was executed, with others, in Reinhardsbrunn, Thuringia, on 18 January 1530, barely 18 months after her baptism.

There is plenty of documentation that those persecuted had already forgiven their tormentors. They did so in the spirit of the Lord's Prayer and that Jesus had prayed, "Forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

And yet the blood witnesses in those times also remind us of Jesus's words: "See, I am

sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves" (Mt 10:16).

Today we see ourselves seriously confronted with the awkward question:

"What would I be ready to die for?"

What are we willing to give up—for heaven's sake? What do we live and work for to the last?

The witness of Anabaptist and other martyrs challenges us today—in our post-Christian or non-Christian societies—to live as the Body of Christ. They point us to Jesus.

He exhorts and encourages us to live in the community of God's shalom, to speak prophetically in this world, to be non-violent in our actions, to serve others and to bring about reconciliation.

And not least to invite others to join us and accompany them as we follow Jesus together.

**TESTIMONY 2:
THEODOR DIETER, DIRECTOR, INSTITUTE FOR
ECUMENICAL RESEARCH STRASBOURG, AND CO-
SECRETARY OF THE LUTHERAN – MENNONITE
INTERNATIONAL STUDY COMMISSION**

Lutherans today recognize and deeply regret that Luther and Melancthon theologically supported the persecution and even execution of Anabaptists—against their own earlier insight that conflicts of true and false doctrine had to be overcome by the word of God, not by the sword. Lutheran reformers accused Anabaptists of being seditious since they denied that Christians could hold an office of temporal authority, even though most of the Anabaptists strictly refused to use violence. Moreover, Lutheran reformers regarded the Anabaptist understanding of baptism, especially their refusal to baptize infants, as blasphemy, which had to be punished by capital punishment according to the

1000-year-old law of the Roman Empire. For this Lutherans appealed to the Mosaic Law, even though Martin Luther had formerly declared a direct appeal to the Old Testament to be theologically illegitimate. The reformers did not have a precise and differentiated perception of Anabaptists; nevertheless, they drew sharp consequences from their limited understanding of the movement. In defending the gospel, the reformers in this case chose strategies that contradicted this very gospel. Therefore Lutherans who continue to adhere to the foundational insights of Lutheran Reformation fittingly ask Mennonites for forgiveness for the Reformers' misperception, misjudgment and misrepresentation of the Anabaptists and all the harm that originated from them.

**TESTIMONY 3:
LARRY MILLER, GENERAL SECRETARY,
MENNONITE WORLD CONFERENCE, AND CO-
SECRETARY OF THE LUTHERAN – MENNONITE
INTERNATIONAL STUDY COMMISSION**

From the beginning of the movement, as you have heard, Anabaptists interpreted their persecution as a confirmation of faithful Christian discipleship. Over the centuries and around the world, stories of faithful suffering became a vital shaper of Anabaptist-Mennonite identity.

In 1660 a Dutch Mennonite pastor compiled these accounts into this influential book, the *Martyrs Mirror*. Second only to Christ as example here is Dirk Willems. Imprisoned for his beliefs, Willems escaped and fled across an icy pond. A soldier chasing him fell through the ice and called out for help. Willems returned to rescue his drowning pursuer. His compassion allowed his recapture, and he was executed.

Yet even as we actively treasure these memories as models, we acknowledge that such remembering, through

**DAY FIVE
24 JULY**

Following the final report of the Credentials and Nominations Committee (Plenary X), the Assembly proceeded to elect 48 new Council members and Bishop Dr Munib A. Younan as the new LWF President (Plenary XI). Illegitimate debt, and HIV and AIDS were the focus of a two-part public hearing (Public Hearing 2); an outdoor evening meal for Assembly participants in the Schillerplatz underscored the universal right of all people to food security.



the centuries and into the present, has come with a price. In our conversations with you and others we have come to see the costs more clearly.

At times, our versions of martyr stories have reduced complex history to simple morality tales of good and evil, in which historical actors are either Christ-like or violent.

At times, we have remembered Lutheran reformers primarily for their arguments and actions against Anabaptists, thereby minimizing the broader theological contributions of these reformers to the Christian church and, indeed, to our own movement.

At times, we have claimed the martyr tradition as a badge of Christian superiority. We sometimes nurtured an identity rooted in victimization that could foster a sense of self-righteousness and arrogance, blinding us to the frailties and failures that are also deeply woven into our tradition.

We too are communities in need of healing and forgiveness. In this action between us there is, for Anabaptist-Mennonites also, the promise of release and renewal.

Lord, help us to remember rightly. Lord, inspire us to speak truthfully. Lord, enable us to walk humbly.

SEEDS OF RECONCILIATION AND PEACE

TESTIMONY 1: EDUARDO MARTÍNEZ, PRESIDING BISHOP OF THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH OF COLOMBIA

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

During the Regional Latin American and Caribbean LWF Pre-assembly we met with the Mennonite Church brothers and sisters in Colombia, and while we expressed

our wish to ask them for forgiveness for the religious intolerance of Lutherans in the past, I realized the meaning of this act of reconciliation between churches in the context and situation we are living in our country.

Colombians have long suffered violence, largely due to the inability of many to tolerate ideological, political or religious differences.

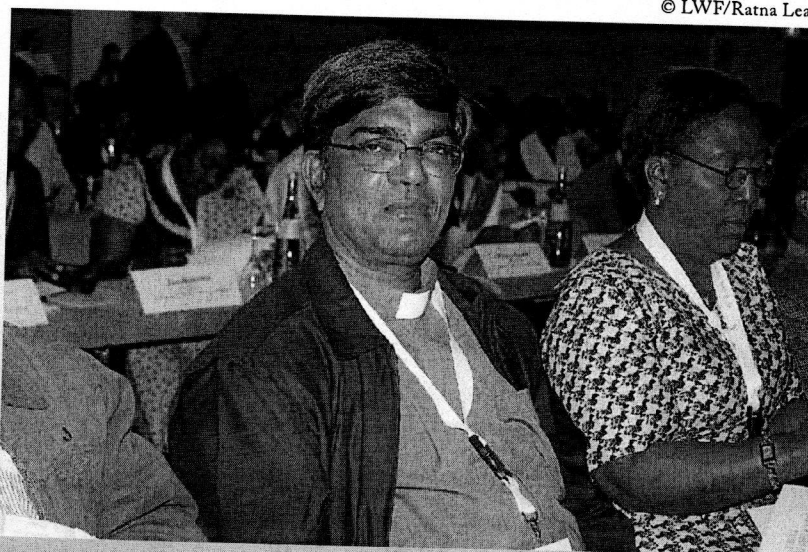
The act of reconciliation of two churches which recognize the importance of healing wounds of the past in order to be able to live in peace in the present gives a message of vital importance to our society. In order to advance firmly in the construction of a sustainable peace, we need to reconcile ourselves departing from the recognition of the errors we have made as society in the past and in the present.

TESTIMONY 2: MICHAEL MARTIN, DIRECTOR, DEPARTMENT "ECUMENICAL AFFAIRS AND CHURCH LIFE", EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN BAVARIA, GERMANY

Mennonites and Lutherans held intensive conversations from 1989 to 1992. They came closer theologically and extended a mutual invitation to the Lord's Supper. A further outcome of the dialogue was a statement by Lutherans "concerning the condemnations of the Augsburg Confession of 1530 directed against the Anabaptists." This affirmed that the doctrinal condemnations of the Reformation period against the Anabaptists are not relevant to today's Mennonite churches. They then confessed their guilt in two joint services in 1996, and asked for forgiveness—as we are doing here today in Stuttgart for our worldwide communion.

It was clear at the time that we could not simply alter the historical text of the *Confessio Augustana* of 1530. But

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After stewards had collected election ballots; in afternoon plenary session, Bishop Dr Solomon Rajah, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malaysia and Mabel Madinga, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malawi.

the point was to state that the condemnations contained in the Augsburg Confession do not apply to today's partners in dialogue.

This affected the inclusion of the *Augsburg Confession* when we were re-editing the hymnal of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria. The introduction to it now reads: "Thanks to the doctrinal dialogues held between the different churches up until the present, the condemnations no longer reflect the current state of relations among the churches and faith communities."

We do not intend to play down the historical wrongdoing. However, this interpretative comment on our *Augsburg Confession* is meant to reflect the change in relations between our churches. In face of the suffering of the past, we can now go our way together in reconciliation—praising God and testifying to God's good message of peace, hope and love.

TESTIMONY 3:
SUSAN C. JOHNSON, NATIONAL BISHOP, EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN CANADA AND JANET PLENERT, EXECUTIVE SECRETARY (WITNESS), MENNONITE CHURCH CANADA, AND VICE PRESIDENT OF THE MENNONITE WORLD CONFERENCE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Janet: When I heard Rev. Dr Ishmael Noko speak in front of 7,000 Mennonites at our global Assembly in Paraguay last summer, I

knew this would be an important agenda for both our churches in the coming years.

Last year a 3,000 Canadian dollars surplus in a small rural Canadian Mennonite congregation resulted in an invitation to the local Lutheran congregation to plant a field of grain together. The project grew, and received matching funding, and 130,000 Canadian dollars were donated collaboratively to help the hungry in the world, to share daily bread.

Susan: Our churches have worked together for many years through ecumenical forums in the areas of advocacy for peace and justice and in relief and development. Now we feel a call to deepen this relationship.

In anticipation of this day, we have begun joint work on a congregational resource to be used by both our church families. This will help us learn about our shared history and this apology, and most importantly, begin to forge new ways of collaboration as a reconciled part of the body of Christ.

Janet: In Canada, we will host a series of regional events for joint study and worship. The first will be hosted by Conrad Grebel University and Waterloo Lutheran Seminary this November.

God is giving us a new heart and a new spirit.

Susan: We are confident that we will be blessed, and we pray that we may be a blessing to others. Thanks be to God!