

## **LWF Report – July 13-July 27, 2010**

### ***Introduction:***

**I want to begin this report of my visit to the Lutheran World Federation Assembly in Stuttgart, Germany, held from July 13 through July 20, by thanking the congregation for the opportunity. Part of the gift given to me several years ago on the occasion of my 35<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Ordination was used to fund the visit. I have divided this report into the following areas: Personal Experiences in Travel to and from the Lutheran World Federation Assembly (Stuttgart, 2010), The Pre-Visitation Program in the North Elbian Church (Hamburg and Lübeck, in particular), and The Lutheran World Assembly Meeting –Participation and Theological Assessments and Considerations.**

### ***Personal Experiences***

**Much to my surprise, some of the best conversation on this trip occurred during my traveling to and from Europe. On the way to Germany, I was seated next to a 30-year-old man (now a 30-year-old person seems young) living in the U.S., returning to visit his family in Southern India. He spoke of his parents' concern related to his living in the west and his movement away from an orthodox Hindu faith. We talked of religion, and my attendance at the conference that focused on the needs of third world countries. He shared in a youthfully delightful way how confused he is in matters of faith but also how he believed his parents' concerns for his living in secular western society are unfounded. It was a pleasure to be able to talk somewhat closely with a person of the Hindu faith, in his age bracket and of his intellectual ability. I enjoyed getting a deeper sense of the life of a young man of the Hindu faith living in the west. My only other experience with someone of this faith was a woman who would come to our Good Shepherd sanctuary almost every Friday to pray and meditate. Few of us take such opportunity, but this Hindu lady who worked nearby did. When I shared this with the young Hindu man, he was surprised, but I did not ask the reason for his surprise.**

**On the way home, I had an even more delightful experience with two other young people sitting in the section where I was seated. First, I noticed that the young teenager next to me was wearing a yarmulke and reading a book entitled, *Jewish Pirates of the Caribbean*. How could that not catch my attention? He turned out to be one of the best read persons I have ever met in my life, as he discussed the writings of the ancient Greeks, Dante and other classical literature, and he is only 14 years old. When I spoke of a personality inventory commonly used called Myers-Briggs, he thought for a moment, and quizzically asked, "Oh, is that based on Jung's archetype personality theory?" This young fellow was something else. Not only was he engaging, but he had a great sense of humor. We both laughed as we shared familiar Seinfeld episodes.**

**Further, we also spoke of arguments for and against the existence of God. He passionately questioned how people who do claim a faith perspective can willfully kill and hurt others. When I asked him how he became such an avid reader and how he has come to such a place of reflection in his young life, he described the way in which his parents taught him to read and how he hated it, but that over time, he came to enjoy it. He said that he and his father would go to Barnes and Noble on Sunday afternoons and pretend they were in their living room at home, and select a book to read. Ash, (abbreviation for his orthodox Jewish name) provided stimulating conversation for almost seven hours. Not only does he possess a high level of intellect, he has an inviting humility. At one point, he said that in his years so far, he has made wrong choices and decisions. Self-reflection and evaluation are gifts of the Spirit, to be sure, and this young man has these gifts.**

**Sitting next to Ash was a young woman of twenty three years, a very attractive college graduate from a notable New York school. She has a strong record of academic achievement, is an accomplished pianist and has a beautiful appearance and personality, but stands out among so many others in that she has not been able to find a job in her field, child psychology. She obviously comes from a fine family and was visiting her extended family in Europe, as she has done every summer since birth. She is Roman Catholic but questions many of the teaching and practices of the church.**

Flying 500 miles an hour at an altitude of 30,000 feet, the three of us sat and spoke for almost seven hours sharing a great deal of respect with one another, openness, and delight in being able to pass the time quickly. I have never had a transcontinental flight that moved so fast and count it a blessing to have met these three people, who live their lives in settings quite different than mine. At one point, the flight attendant came to me and said, “You look like a movie star, but I can’t think of his name.” First off, I knew she did not mean Paul Newman. I said, “Oh, you mean that wild and crazy guy,” and we all laughed at the humor of Steve Martin. I have had this reaction any number of times.

In addition to the laughter during our time together, reflection on the interchange has made me more aware of how our Lutheran understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ is so centered in what God does for us. In all the other expressions of religious belief, even with Roman Catholicism, there seemed to be a sense that religion is about what God expects of us almost exclusive of God’s grace. While Lutherans understand that God’s righteousness expects complete obedience of us, our faith also understands that there is nothing in us that can live in this complete obedience. Only Jesus has fulfilled the expectations and demands of complete righteousness; we, indeed, are the beneficiaries of God righteousness worked out in Christ’s life, suffering, death and resurrection. As we shared our particular experiences of faith, we were all good listeners—and listening is a gift, to be sure. I did not dwell on this point at all but only posited it as a thought at one point in our conversation. I do think it important, however, for those of us who are drawn to an evangelical-Lutheran (not just evangelical) understanding of the faith to give such matters our consideration and reflection.

#### *Visiting the North Elbian Lutheran Church*

The Lutheran World Federation offers a program for those attending the assembly, held every six years, to visit one of the local churches in the host country. I did not realize there are about eight Lutheran Churches in Germany and some include mergers with those of the Reformed tradition. There were about ten different areas from which to choose and my first choice was to visit the northern church, since I would be spending time in the Württemberg church located near Stuttgart. Also, I had visited in the east and the south-southwest of Germany on prior visits. In fact, I had visited Hamburg while I was on internship in 1971, but I wanted to visit this area again because German pastors serving in the U. S. thought that a visit to Lübeck would enable me to see one of Germany’s most beautiful, old cities.

While the LWF (Lutheran World Federation) planned a superb assembly, the planning of the pre-visitation program by the LWF left something to be desired, not only for the participant but also for the host. Information about where the participants would be lodged and what was planned was not shared until one day before the event began. I was told in an email that someone would meet me at the airport and take me to a train scheduled to arrive in Luther-Stadt Wittenberg. There someone would meet me and take me to a hotel. My response was that this had the feel of a spy novel, and that it seemed to require the faith of Abraham and Sarah as sojourners to an unknown place. I took matters into my own hands and am glad I did. Rather than go to Wittenberg, I decided to go directly to Hamburg. It made no sense to me to visit Wittenberg for five waking hours, since it was out of the way toward Hamburg. Plus, I had been there several years ago and didn’t think that a visit of a few hours would be beneficial.

It was a wise decision on my part to head directly to Hamburg. When I arrived, Germany was experiencing one of the worst heat waves ever. Air conditioning was not working in new trains that were in use on the German railways—no easy matter for a people that take pride in doing things “right”. People were being taken off the trains and sent to hospitals because of heat exhaustion. I came close to this myself after not having slept on the flight and not realizing that for the escalators to work, one must push a button. Carrying heavy baggage up and down an escalator or two in 90-plus degree weather at the Frankfurt airport train station was more than my body could manage. A piece of German chocolate did help, however, but not for long. Also, German customs is not strictly organized and getting through the airport was a “trek” in itself. Compounding this with walking up and down non-functioning escalators in

dreadful heat, I was finished even before my adventure began. Hence, my arrival in Hamburg was most welcome, especially since I had, at least for one night of my trip, a good sleep in an air-conditioned room.

Arriving in Hamburg, on a train wherein the air conditioning functioned beautifully, I could only think to myself “Yippee”. The next day, I went to visit St. Michael’s Church, the prominent Lutheran church in Hamburg. It was like going home, in some way, for me. While in Hamburg years ago, I ran out of money and could not get money wired to me. The pastor, Pastor Quest, as I was reminded of his name, graciously (after many efforts on our part) helped us more than we could ever hope. My travel partner and I stayed in the pastor’s exquisite home. He took us on a full tour of Hamburg, including the Reeperbahn, a famous area in Hamburg where prostitution is legalized, and where he introduced us to some fine German beer. Returning after 40-plus years was wonderful. St. Michael’s is a huge church with a big program ministry. The son of J. S. Bach, Immanuel, served as the organist in this parish and is buried in the undercroft, along with his wife and children. I was able to stand in front of the burial site and just enjoy being at a place that made such an impression on me when I was a student. On a side note, it is more fun to travel without money than with money, but this is only the case if one is young in years.

Along with the visit to St. Michael’s Church, I enjoyed the delicious and hardy foods of Germany and met up the next day with my host. I say, “my” host, because he, too, was clueless about how many people were participating in the pre-visitation program, although he had been told that up to fifty would attend—and for fifty he prepared. The day before I arrived, he emailed me and told me I was the only participant. When I met him at the train station, he said there were several others but he was not sure who would attend. Indeed, we had a fine group, consisting of Pastor Kenneth Kross, from Suriname located near Venezuela; Dr. Jensen, both a pastor and a medical doctor from Myramar (formerly Burma) whose last name I need yet secure (he had some wonderful remedies for all different kinds of ailments, including chopping alligator meat into squares, boiling it with mixed spices and consuming the residue—I think I prefer arthritis); Pastor Arul Manuel Selvaraj, from South India; and Madame Maria Nkulu Nsenga and her husband, Daneil Kabamba-Mukak Wa Kasonku, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Congo. Maria dressed beautifully in traditional African clothing. She was a small woman, very beautiful, kind and sweet, but could she eat. I have no idea how she was able to maintain such a beautiful figure. The leader of our group was Wolfgang Vogelmann, director for Ecumenical Relations of the North Elbian Church. By the way, the name of the church comes from the Elbe River that flows through that part of Germany. Wolfgang provided a full and in depth program for us. He went out of his way and was nothing but the perfect host as he represented the North Elbian Church. He holds the gratitude of the pre-visitation participants.

Once we all met at the “Bahnhof” (train station), we were brought by van to a beautiful area of Hamburg, the Mission Academy of the University of Hamburg, supported by the church. We had small, but very fine accommodations. The food was nothing short of magnificent—breads, cheeses, fruits, salads, sparkling waters, wine and beer, and on and on. The church paid all our expenses, even when we were eating “on the road”. Breakfast in Germany is something to behold and take in. The cheeses, the breads, the yogurt are all delicious, but the coffee is heavenly and it isn’t Chock Full of Nuts. (I wonder what happened to that brand.) Our time at the Mission Academy was truly enjoyable and enriching.

The program included an orientation by Michael Biehl, the director and a fine individual, indeed. I shared with him about Dick Biehl, a hard worker here at Good Shepherd for many years. The purpose of the institute is to help educate students of the ministry, both lay and ordained, in ecumenical affairs, including non-Christian religions.

While in Hamburg, we visited an ecumenical program whose “seed” was planted by Herr Vogelmann years ago. This is an effort by many denominations to serve together in a secular society and in a new area that is being developed on the river, once occupied by the ship building industry. The program includes communal housing for families who want to live a communal lifestyle with other Christians. It

includes developing programs that engage secular culture with a sensitive Christian presence, seeking both justice and community, alongside prayer and service to those in need. How wonderful it was to see the work of many years come to fruition and to know that the growth continues.

As part of the Hamburg tour, we met with members of an ecumenical group that oversee vast sums of benevolence dollars that support projects in the third world. The people we met discussed the problems of decreased funding and increased needs. The church in Germany has had a close relationship with mission fields since the 1800s. Related matters were discussed with regard to how best to fund projects, including the question as to whether funds should be directed to non-religious efforts if the local religious organizations are not capably managing the monies, or if these funds should be directed to other religious and non-church-related efforts where the monies are best utilized.

Moving along in our visitation on Friday of that week, we visited the beautiful old and evangelical cathedral city of Lübeck. The cathedral was begun around the year 1000. It has a huge clock in it. Many churches have such clocks, symbolizing that our time is in God's hands. We met with two lovely pastors who work in women ministries in the city. We were hosted for lunch at a restaurant operated by the diaconal services of the Lutheran church. This one church region alone has a budget of 354 million Euros, about 400 plus million dollars, overseeing hundreds of parishes, and a plethora of institutions and mission projects. Part of our lunch time together also included meeting with the director of justice ministries for the wider church. He spoke of efforts by the church to counteract the rising influence of right wing extremism in northern Germany. Visiting this historic town was a highlight of the trip.

In addition to these visits, there were two sessions that included time with seminarians and one with a doctoral student from Malaysia. I was very impressed with the caliber of the students. Of course, most young people seem to speak English beautifully. Here, in the U.S., three years of seminary and one year of internship follows four years of undergraduate studies. In Germany, internship is a two-year program and follows four years of undergraduate work in theology at the university. Students are educated in a classical theological style, with emphasis on Latin, Greek and Hebrew. This is less the case in the U. S. The German seminarian is primarily a young person. In the U.S., most seminarians are second career people, with a clear focus on practical studies. Our group was grateful for the opportunity to meet these students.

Also included in our agenda was a visit to an independent congregation for African immigrants, Pentecostal in style, supported by the North Elbian Church. These folks were delightfully kind and inviting. We also attended a service at St. Peter Church, which is the city center. This congregation offers special counseling services, particularly serving the gay and lesbian population.

Unfortunately, only part of our group attended worship that Sunday morning, myself and the pastor from Suriname were not included because of travel complications. The buses were not running that day because of a triathlon held in Hamburg. Our leader had called a taxi for us because his car was full, but the taxi never came. Many were in the area but would not take us, either because of the traffic or because some other taxi was scheduled to bring us and felt that it would not be fair to take away the business from another driver. That honesty was appreciated but didn't help get us to the service. Finally, I asked a young person to help me make a local call with my new Blackberry and when he heard of our need, he insisted that he drive us into the city. Generally speaking, German people can be quite reserved, initially. This young fellow was a German-Turk and was very outgoing, unlike the indigenous population. It was all a "fun" time, except for Mr. Vogelmann, who was worried about where we were.

After the church service and meetings, we enjoyed a walk down the streets of Hamburg and were hosted to another wonderful meal on a sidewalk café restaurant. We ended the day by visiting a beautiful area along the banks of the river with beautiful houses named "Blankenase". At a local café, we held our evaluation session. On this day, Mr. Vogelmann's lovely wife joined us. She is a delightful person and

works in a special program helping children with disabilities use their body balance to help manage their emotional challenges. A more gracious person one could not meet.

Concluding our time in Hamburg was a session on Sunday night in which we discussed the concerns raised, as well as the strengths of the ministries we had visited. We also discussed the major issues confronting the LWF, as it seeks to become more fully a communion of churches, yet is divided by understandings on human sexuality, gender justice, economic disparity and hunger issues. The visit to the North Elbian Church was a source of renewal for me because I met so many genuine faithful people whose faith is centered in service to others in deepest need, alongside a heartfelt energy that works for justice in society.

### *The LWF Assembly*

Arriving in Stuttgart was on another very hot day. However, while the vans were not air-conditioned, the train was. By this time, I was adjusting to the high temperatures, but when I arrived in my hotel room, I felt like a chicken being baked in an oven. I was looking to my right and left for roasted potatoes. It was very uncomfortable, to say the least, and alongside this was a ¾-mile uphill walk to the assembly sessions, which I traveled six times a day. Nevertheless, the walk did not counter the added calories of a German holiday breakfast.

While I held no official roll in the proceedings, I was there as an official visitor. Close to 1000 people were present, including those helping from the local Württemberg church. We began with a service of Holy Communion at the Stiftkirche, the main church in central Stuttgart. The original building dates back to the 11th century. Like so much of Germany, this church was bombed and rebuilt. The service was “interactive,” in that it had traditional aspects as well as contemporary chancel drama action in the liturgy. The place was packed. The boy’s choir was excellent. At all services, the congregation sang songs in different languages from all over the world. The presiding Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Bishop Hanson, preached and spoke on the theme of the assembly, “Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread”. After this nationally televised service, the assembly convened at the Liederhalle, a new composite of buildings dedicated to the musical arts. Even as a visitor, participation was thrilling for me.

Reaching a zenith for my experience that week was an address by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Never before had I heard this man speak and never before have I ever heard such a meaningful address on the stated subject. I am going to add his address as an addendum to this report. The archbishop is an excellent speaker and a humble man. Those in attendance hung on every word. What I particularly noted in his address was how he developed the idea that the petition following the Bread Petition asks for forgiveness. He said our combined effort to bring nourishment justice to the world requires repentance, and forgives those who have but do not share. Take the time to read the address of Archbishop Rowan.

The assembly elected a new leader, (president) who is The Reverend Dr. Munib Younan, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land/Palestine. He spoke about how he became a Christian and a Lutheran. It all started with a cup of chocolate milk that was given to him by the Lutheran World Federation through the work of Lutheran World Relief in the 1950s. Palestine is a deep concern of the LWF and is working for justice in that region. Bishop Younan was unopposed in the election.

A major concern of the assembly was sent to committee as it is a source of conflict to the communion of churches. This is the matter of same-gender relationships. The southern countries hold to a traditional understanding of said relationships and live in very conservative cultures. Churches of the north have members that hold differing positions. Pre-assembly decisions put this matter on hold until further work can be done and discussion can be held on a local basis.

Another major concern of the assembly is the injustice that women face in many parts of the world. A quota system is in place for assemblies of the LWF, but managing these quotas is not easy, especially given the status of women in many areas of the world. Efforts continue to be made to reverse these injustices under the leadership of the LWF.

Central to the assembly this year was a moving service held after the assembly repented for the actions of Luther and the other reformers in ordering the killing of Anabaptist Christians during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, because their beliefs were deemed to be heretical and to endanger babies not baptized, as was their practice. Mennonites participated in these discussions leading up to the assembly and participated in a truly beautiful service of repentance and forgiveness. Further, a representative of the world Pentecostal order spoke and shared his reflections on the ecumenical dialogue the Lutheran church has concluded with representatives of the Pentecostal churches. Ecumenical work is central to the mission of the LWF.

Typically, a day of our time together would include a service of Holy Communion, using contemporary and traditional worship forms. A Bible study was held each day on one of the words of the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer – Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread. This was followed by "Village Gatherings," wherein participants discussed concerns about a variety of subjects related to world hunger, injustice, climate change, HIV and illegitimate debt, as well as scientific advances in alleviating world hunger.

Following a coffee break, a plenary session was held, wherein assembly business was conducted. Lunch was held, and a fine lunch it was. In the afternoon, other plenary sessions were held that included local and national speakers. Noon and later afternoon prayers were part of the assembly gathering, with wonderful music. On the first night, we were blessed with a presentation of the local Württemberg Lutheran church that included Martin 'himself,' a German brass band, and large children's and adult choir. The Sunday service was held in the Stiftskirche, with the Stuttgart Cantorei singing the traditional portions of the service. The days were full and the time went quickly.

Personally, I had the opportunity to visit friends of the von Autenrieds, members of Good Shepherd Church, who live in Stuttgart. They have a beautiful home filled with art treasures and a view of Stuttgart that is breathtaking. I did not see the pool that is on the first level of this house and carved into the mountain side. They were very gracious in welcoming me to a fine lunch.

Later on that week, friends traveled from Vienna to visit with me. We visited Ludwigsburg, a town not far from Stuttgart and toured the famous castle of King Ludwig. This castle is one of Germany's most famous examples of baroque architecture. The next day we visited Tübingen. Tübingen is a great medieval town and known for its theological school. I also got to enjoy local Schwabian beer and food, including "spaetzle" and "maultaschen", a large ravioli-type dish. It was believed that the priests of the middle ages would hide meat in these noodle-covered dishes in order to hide the fact they were eating meat on Friday, so the waitress informed me. Overall, these are not foods that one wants to eat later in the evening, as they originated for farmers working all day in the field and not assembly-goers sitting all day in a meeting.

On my way home, I took the wrong train but eventually found my way to Frankfurt. While in Frankfurt, I took the U-Bahn, the subway, to the center of the city. Had it not been for some kind local folk, I would have gotten lost again. The city was completely bombed, but has been restored. There are many wonderful churches, not the least of which is the church wherein many Emperors of the Holy Roman Empire were crowned during the 15th – 17th centuries. I was surprised by how much I enjoyed the city of Frankfurt.

### *Theological Reflections*

Underlying the good news of Jesus Christ for Luke, the Evangelist, is the joy of God over one sinner who repents. The Lutheran World Federation reflects this very joy in its mission and ministry in many places

the world over, yet the delegates seemed reserved in nature. What a joy it was for me to meet so many people from around the world. I have invitations to visit in Finland, Australia, Suriname, Myramar, a tiny island three hours from Jakarta in Indonesia, the Congo and Liberia, to name a few.

Even in our joy, there are divisions between the northern and southern hemispheres. The north, while seeking justice for those excluded—women, youth, same-gender relationships, needs to be patient and not impose a “northern world view” on others, while at the same time continuing dialogue about these matters.

Another difference I experienced at the assembly is that the northern hemisphere churches seem to have defined themselves as “servant churches”, whereas the southern churches are more defined as “eschatological churches”. I think this is a differentiation that needs to be understood more fully. Clearly, the north represents a more intellectual understanding of the faith, clearly committed to matters of justice, whereas the south lives out its faith, reflecting the piety it received from 18<sup>th</sup> century missionaries from the north. While public worship is an expression of the faith of the church, there is no substitute for a personal expression of the faith in daily life. Christians of the north need to recapture the ability to share the faith of Christ in daily language that is spoken from the heart. The church is only the church when it is both serving human need with mercy and justice, and witnessing to the living God in Jesus, who is the true and only “Bread of Life”. Both north and south, in the wider church, need to grow in a more commonly shared balance with regard to these matters, in my opinion.

In addition, the worship services I attended, while marvelously planned, left me desiring a deeper sense of the transcendent God. I did experience this as I walked in on the Adoration of the Host in a Roman Catholic Church. The Paschal mystery of faith needs expression in our worship. Faithfulness to traditional worship forms tended not to play a significant role at most services. I was surprised by how the churches around Stuttgart do not seem to use the traditional forms associated with the Western Rite of the church. Rather, a more reformed and interactive, contemporary approach to worship seems to be in use. While highly relational, something seemed lacking.

*Conclusion:*

My intention in this report is to share with the congregation and other interested persons, my experience and response to the LWF visitation. My hope is that this report has been able to provide personal experiences of travel from a faith perspective, share a bit about the pre-visitation program of the LWF in northern Germany, provide insights into the experience of attending an assembly wherein so many nations of the world are represented, along with the indigenous Lutheran churches of the LWF Communion, and offer a few theological thoughts related to this trip.

What I have brought home with me is a that the wideness in God’s mercy is, indeed, “wider than the sea”. It has touched every part of the planet. We are one in Christ, and through Christ we are one with the creator and one with the creation. There is much to do to bring home the message of justice, mercy and faith in Jesus to the world. What a joy to know that the LWF is committed, as a communion of churches, to witness to this Bread of Life in our time and our day. What a joy it was for me to have met so many people, genuine in their faith and deeply concerned about the world in which we live. What a joy it is to be part of a worldwide church and to know that while the church is fully the church in a local congregation, the church is best understood as being inter-dependent in its unity and mission. To be the church means that no one can go it alone. To be the church in the world today means that we are blessed with the Spirit that “calls, gathers, enlightens, sanctifies and keeps it united in Jesus Christ.” (Luther) I am deeply grateful for this opportunity and look forward to speaking with those who might have questions and thoughts with regard to my experience at the LWF assembly.

Respectfully submitted, John W. Havrilla 28. July 2010. Day Commemorating Bach, Schutz and Handel.