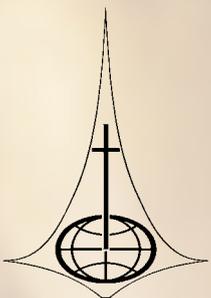




LWF ELEVENTH ASSEMBLY
STUDY MATERIALS

Day Three

Today



The Lutheran World Federation
– A Communion of Churches



The LWF Eleventh Assembly study material takes into account the regional focus of the meeting's worship life. Each of the six brochures includes a contribution from an LWF region on "Questions worth pondering" (p. 7); a hymn (p. 8), a feature story (p. 10) related to the assembly theme "Give Us Today Our Daily Bread," and information about some of the region's staple foods (p. 16).

This brochure is dedicated to the Central Western Europe and Central Eastern Europe regions.

Parallel edition in French, German and Spanish

Onzième Assemblée de la FLM, Matériel d'étude
– Troisième jour : Aujourd'hui

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Bible Study Three: Today

Between yesterday and tomorrow

The world in which we live is never quite the same from one day to the next. Whether changes happen gradually or suddenly, we sooner or later come to realize that our world is no longer what it used to be. Depending on our past history, present situation and future prospects, that realization may fill us with a mixture of sadness, worry or eager expectation. Young people often remind their elders that it is not wise to expect their children to live as though things were the same today as they were “back then.” Every **today** is unique. Every day brings its own “trouble” (Mt 6:34), but it also brings new opportunities that cause us to “rejoice” (Ps 118:24).

So, what does it mean when Jesus encourages the disciples to ask God for nourishment specifically for **today**? Does our hunger today differ from the hunger of a previous generation? Do we today hunger for different things? Do we, therefore, need different kinds of nourishment? There is food for the body, food for the

spirit, food for the mind. People hunger for love, for hope, for joy. People feel deprived emotionally, aesthetically, materially. What different sorts of food might be required most **today**?

Let us focus on one particular set of examples to illustrate how—during days that called for significant adjustments in the life of the church—God “nourished” the young church with the kind of food for the mind and for the spirit that was necessary to enable it to deal with the new challenge.

Day One: the day of the big sheet (Acts 10:1-23)

As Luke tells the story, Peter in the town of Joppa rose from noon-hour prayer one day when some people knocked at the door. They introduced themselves as messengers from a Roman centurion at Caesarea by the name

of Cornelius. They requested Peter to come with them to Caesarea to visit Cornelius and to speak to his extended family there. Under normal circumstances, Peter would no doubt have turned the messengers away without giving it another thought. Don't these Gentiles know that Jews and Gentiles don't mix, and certainly don't visit with each other or—God forbid—maybe even eat together?

But **today** was different. Peter was still trying to make sense of what had just happened (Acts 10:17). Just a few minutes earlier Peter had seen something strange and heard something even stranger. A "voice" (Acts 10:13) had encouraged him to kill and eat various sorts of animals that Peter found revolting. Ever since youth, Peter had been taught that eating meat from so-called unclean animals was strictly forbidden by scripture (Lev 11:4-46; Deut 14:3-20). So, if Peter were to do as this voice said, he would be acting contrary to the will of God.

What sort of voice could this have been? These words did not sound like a message from God. On the contrary, they seemed like an invitation to sin. Wasn't this the kind of thing that the serpent in the garden had said to Adam and Eve, urging them to eat of the fruit from the forbidden tree? By cleverly changing the word of God, the serpent had succeeded in making a prohibition sound like an invitation (Gen 3:1-5). Peter was determined not to fall for a trick like that. He reacted with horror: Never! "I have never eaten anything . . . unclean." (10:14) But the vision and the voice persisted (10:15): "Stop trying to make impure something that God made clean!" [author's paraphrase].

Peter must have been puzzled: When did God ever make such food "clean"? Could this perhaps be a reference to the time of creation when God looked at all the living creatures God had made and pronounced them "good" (Gen 1:24-25)? Peter must have had a lot of unanswered questions.

Peter must have seen a connection between the vision on the roof and the visitors at the door. The voice in the vision had invited Peter to eat impure meat, and the visitors at the door were pleading with Peter to come and eat with impure people. Both invitations created a problem for Peter. For a person of his religious upbringing, both actions were unthinkable.

Where to turn for guidance?

No doubt the first question to arise in Peter's mind was this: What would Jesus advise his disciples to do in such a situation? But that

question only raised more questions, such as these: When did Jesus ever enter the house of a Gentile? Did Jesus ever talk about the possibility of being invited into the home of a Gentile? Jesus had ministered almost exclusively in Jewish surroundings. The Pharisees and Sadducees, the tax collectors and the street people, the lepers, the fisher folk and the carpenters, the rich and the poor—practically all of the people Jesus dealt with were Jewish in language, culture and upbringing and lived in the cultural world of the Judaism of the time. Jesus himself was born of a Jewish mother and grew up in a Jewish home.

True, it is reported that Jesus did occasionally respond to the plea of a Gentile, such as the Syrophenician woman (Mk 7:24-30), the Gerasene Demoniac (Mk 5:1-20) and the Roman Centurion at Capernaum (Mt 8:5-13), but such encounters were the exception. Mark even reports that Jesus gave the Gentile woman to understand that to help her daughter would be like throwing food to the dogs (Mk 7:27). So, it is understandable that when Peter was confronted with the invitation to come and help Cornelius and his household, he felt unprepared for such a momentous step. How to deal with such a totally unexpected turn of events? Was Peter finally persuaded by the memory that Jesus had at least sent the Syrophenician woman on her way with an encouraging word: "you may go—the demon has left your daughter" (Mk 7:29)?

Day Two: in strange territory (Acts 10:24-48)

When Peter and Cornelius met (Acts 10:23-43), they quickly came to understand that God had been at work in both of their lives long before either one of them was aware of it. Cornelius was one of those Gentiles who had been attracted to Judaism and the God of the Jews for quite some time. Luke emphasizes that Cornelius was a "devout man" (10:2) who feared God and was highly respected by the people. He and his household had already been praying (even doing so at the Jewish hour of prayer). He frequently supported Jewish causes financially (10:2, 22). Cornelius even had had a vision very like the vision that Peter had experienced. Now the household of Cornelius was ready and waiting for Peter to say something (10:33). It seemed that God had personally set the stage and opened the door for Peter to step in. All that was left for Peter to do was to preach a sermon about God's gracious impartiality.

When the sermon ended, the assembled company had an experience almost identical with that which the disciples had at Pentecost. The Gentiles began to speak in tongues—an outward sign that the Holy Spirit had been poured out on them. God had taken control of Peter’s visit. Not only Peter, but also the “circumcised believers” (Jewish Christians, 10:45) who had accompanied Peter from Joppa, had become convinced that under these circumstances, baptism was entirely appropriate. There was complete silence when Peter asked whether anybody had any objections. So Peter proceeded. Baptism “in the name of Jesus Christ” (10:48) confirmed that God had indeed conferred the Holy Spirit. With the baptism of Cornelius and his household, a new day had dawned. Things would never be the same again in the Early Church.

This calls to mind the scripture that Jesus had read in the synagogue at Nazareth at the beginning of his public ministry.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to
the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

(Lk 4:18f., a combination of phrases from Isa
42:7 and Lev 25:10)

At that time Jesus announced “**Today** this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4:21). The baptism of Cornelius and his household marks a new stage in that fulfillment. Peter probably did not even realize how significant a step he had taken. From his perspective—from his context, from his new **today**—it was clear that what had happened was indeed God’s will. But would others in the church see it that way, too?

Some days later: the day of the inquiry (Acts 11:1-18)

In the very next verse Luke reports that the authorities in Jerusalem were not amused when they heard what Peter had done in Caesarea. For the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem it had seemed entirely appropriate to continue to practice circumcision as Moses had commanded. So they called on Peter to explain why he had departed from the divine requirement that had become part of standard procedure.

“Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?” (Acts 11:3). Peter simply related, step by step, the series of experiences that had led him to do what he had done, and he pointed to the six witnesses who had accompanied him from Joppa (11:12) and who could confirm the truthfulness of his account.

As Peter was defending his actions, he suddenly remembered that Jesus had actually said something that could clarify the case at hand. Jesus had said “. . . you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (11:16, referring back to 1:5). Suddenly it became clear: what Jesus had been talking about had now actually happened—not once, but twice. It had happened first at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came on the Jewish disciples, and it had now happened again in the house of Cornelius when the Gentiles were granted the same experience. What more was there to be debated? God had poured out the Holy Spirit on Gentiles—uncircumcised as they were! Was God not saying loudly and clearly that circumcision was no longer to be regarded as a divine requirement? To ignore that insight, Peter claims, would have been to “hinder God” (11:17).

Peter’s testimony was convincing. On this **today** Peter’s critics “were silenced” and “praised God.” They acknowledged that “God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life” (11:18).

Some time later: the day of the big debate (Acts 15:1-29)

Only a few chapters later, Peter and James (and now also Paul and Barnabas together with the apostles and elders) again are locked in dispute. Something had changed in the Early Church that made it necessary to look at that whole Jewish-Gentile issue again, but this time from a somewhat different perspective. An official meeting was called to debate the statement “unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (15:1).

Evidently there were powerful leaders in Jerusalem who still insisted that before a man could become a Christian, he had to become a circumcised Jew. Peter gave a passionate argument against that statement, concluding: “On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will” (Acts 15:11).

In a classical understatement, Luke reports that there was “much debate” (15:7). Many



scholars today are convinced that the “Jerusalem Conference” was the most significant meeting in the entire history of the church.

According to Luke the terms of the agreement were sent to the churches in the form of a letter. The key sentence in that agreement reads as follows. “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication” (15:28-29).

But did this letter settle the issue once and for all? Was everybody satisfied after receiving it? Well, Paul was no doubt very pleased because of what the statement did **not** say. Although several *essentials* were listed, circumcision was **not** one of them. But what about the eating of food “sacrificed to idols” (15:29)? According to Paul’s own words, the eating or not eating of such food is immaterial. Paul later wrote to the Corinthians: “. . . we are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do” (1 Cor 8:8b). In these matters, says Paul, Christians are free to consume or to abstain. Of course, Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, will not force his freedom on others (such as the majority of Jewish Christians) who may be overcome by a guilty conscience when they eat certain foods (1 Cor 8:9, 13; 10:25-32). For the sake of those who are “weak,” Paul will refrain from exercising his Christian freedom. He would rather abstain than give others a guilty conscience over things that really are of little consequence.

On the **today** of the “Jerusalem Conference,” the church was guided to let pastoral sensitivities prevail by honoring both the *freedom* of the one group and the *conscientious reservations* of the other. Paul would regard such a course of action as “fulfilling the law of Christ by bearing one another’s burdens” (cf. Gal 6:2).

Between yesterday and tomorrow

How can we in the church hope to meet the new challenges of our own **today**? After the death and resurrection of the Christ, the disciples quickly discovered that they could no longer meet Jesus in the flesh and request from him direct responses to questions that had not been addressed adequately before. But neither did the followers of Jesus feel that he had left them without guidance. They had several resources at their disposal for addressing such issues.

They consulted Holy Scripture. They remembered what Jesus had said and done. They relied on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. They debated and prayed with their sisters and brothers in the faith.

What are some of the most pressing issues that demand our attention **today**? The list is almost endless, but it will certainly include the following:

- the ever-widening gap between rich and poor
- the level of starvation throughout the world
- the pollution and depletion of the earth
- the possibly irreversible change of climate
- the spiritual void among so many of the world’s inhabitants
- the dehumanizing conditions under which so many people must exist today

In a world in which the context changes from day to day, it is not possible to reach absolute and final conclusions on any subject. Nevertheless, the rich gifts and promises of God and the power of the Holy Spirit do enable us to find God-pleasing ways of walking responsibly **today**.

When new and vexing issues arise, there can be another gathering of the faithful at which everyone can speak their piece and expect to be treated with dignity and respect. People can study the scriptures, worship together, sing praises to God, share one another’s pains and joys, debate and pass resolutions. The final decision may not be to everyone’s liking. Some may even swallow quite hard. But when it is all over, people can confidently say “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. . .” God is opening up new possibilities and is calling us to new ventures, the ending of which is still unknown. Thank God for again giving us the “bread” that is appropriate for **today**!

This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. (Ps 118:24)

From the Central Western Europe
and Central Eastern Europe regions

Questions worth pondering

Every day God creates new realities and opportunities. We only need to recognize them.

Where do we see in our everyday lives the new opportunities that God creates?

As representatives of western, central and eastern Europe, we are accustomed to planning, anticipating and organizing everything.

Are we really able today to accept God's action as a promise or an opportunity?

Many people are looking for work, lack adequate housing or are ill.

Can we adequately translate our Savior's words "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens," and what does the word "bread" mean to us today? Apart from food intake, do we recognize the real needs and dire necessities of persons in our immediate vicinity?

Bread is not only food. We often need more in our daily lives.

How can the "bread of life" not only fill our stomachs, but also satisfy our hunger for meaning and fulfillment?

Nearly everything is available to us. Supermarket shelves are full. We have an overabundance of information.

What is the quality of our physical and spiritual nourishment today and how do we measure it?

We often only take a small part of our fellow human beings into consideration and are therefore often unjust toward them.

How can we see into the hearts of our fellow human beings and hear what they are really saying ("aufs Maul sehen," as Luther put it), and reach the whole person?

We often only turn to people who are immediately around us—people we can confide in, friends.

How can we avoid frequenting only our individual church circle? How can we make room for others, including strangers?

"Today" also means speaking the language of today.

How can we avoid empty clichés and speech bubbles and bring people the good news of Jesus Christ in clear, comprehensible language?

From Hungary

Hymn

For this our food we thank you Lord

Sulyok Imre

Vainö Malmivaara: Hungary



U - runk há - la, hogy - te táp - lász nap - ról nap - ra szün - te - len!
For the food which you keep giv - ing day by day, we bless your name.
God, our hearts are filled with long - ing wait - ing to be tru - ly fed.



Áld - va légy, hogy min - den új nap új ö - röm, új ke - gye - lem!
Joy and grace re - fresh each morn - ing, so your good - ness we pro - claim.
Let us taste of life e - ter - nal when with Je - sus we eat bread.

English: LWF Office for Communication Services
and Terry MacArthur



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Devotion

A new teaching!

They were all amazed, and kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching – with authority!"

Mk 1:27

The world around us is changing at a pace so fast that it is impossible to stay abreast of what is new, even within the small circle of your own limited horizon.

Literally, every day brings new discoveries, new insights, as well as new problems. So, it is necessary not only to be aware of what is new; it is essential to distinguish between what is "new" in the sense of recent or faddish, and "new" in the sense of fresh, remarkable and strange.

The "new" teaching of Jesus falls into the second category (Greek has a special word for it: *kainos*, not *neos*). It comes as a breath of fresh air and as liberating power.

The audience in Mark 1:27 recognized with amazement that this *new teaching* of Jesus is not just a matter of passing on information; it is intimately connected with the powerful action of Jesus who casts out unclean spirits (1:27b) and so frees people from captivity.

In our Bible study this morning we also learn that this newness of the gospel enabled those who heard it to leave old convictions behind and follow the guiding of the Spirit into a new land where barriers between people are overcome and those who have been separated for so long embrace one another, tolerate one another, work with one another, bear one another's burdens and praise God together in a new language.

Prayer

Gracious God, give us *today* the bread that nourishes us on the way to *newness*.

Amen

Together at one table – Stuttgart's Vesperkirche

As the German winter lingers on and the Christmas spirit of giving wanes, a church in central Stuttgart opens its doors and for several weeks becomes a "home away from home" for many persons.

In affluent Germany, there are many people who do not have access to the minimal necessities such as sufficient food, health care and social activities. Hence, the Stuttgart Vesperkirche project was launched in the early 1990s, the dream of Stuttgart's then pastor for diakonia, Martin Friz. People, who in other circumstances would never meet, were to gather in one place and share a meal. From its very inception, the Vesperkirche was to be a place where poor people and the well-off, people on the fringe of society and those who enjoy a bourgeois existence, would come together to socialize. And this place was to be a church, the medieval church of St Leonhard in the heart of Stuttgart, the capital of the federal state of Baden Württemberg.



Vesperkirche Stuttgart, the church opens its doors to those who in need of physical & spiritual nourishment. © Vesperkirche/Reiner Fieselmann

In early 2009, Rev. Karin Ott, the new pastor for diakonia in Stuttgart since autumn 2008, took the baton from Martin Friz. "The vision of the Vesperkirche of sharing life together became reality over the past weeks," she said at the closing of the most recent Vesperkirche at the end of February 2009. The fact that the Vesperkirche succeeds in bringing people with fundamentally different life situations together to have a good time fascinates her. "Small children and 90-year olds, failed businessmen and third-generation welfare recipients come to us." The Vesperkirche gives them much more than a warm meal: "Our guests receive practical support in precarious life situations and respite in the daily struggle to survive."

Many preparations were necessary so that the Vesperkirche could get under way 15 years ago.

Church pews had to be removed, container toilets had to be installed, a volunteer head cook and a canteen kitchen had to be found and a delivery service had to be set up, just to name a few. The Stuttgart Vesperkirche received around 70 guests on the opening day in January 1995; in 2009, it received around 700 visitors daily.

Guests include retirees who because of periods of unemployment receive minimal pensions; adolescents without school-leaving certificates who have no chance on the job market, families and single parents whose tiny incomes do not go very far in the expensive capital, female sex-workers, street people and many others. The range of assistance available has been broadened. Over time, the Vesperkirche has become a kind of temporary social service. It is funded primarily through donations, which amount to around EUR 240,000 per year.

Every morning at 9 a.m. the church opens its doors. A small group gathers at the coffee bar. A few steps away, a social worker is conversing with a visitor. The church gradually fills up. Two men sit at a sunlit table playing chess.

Around 11:30, helpers bring in the first meal delivery in huge kettles. A line begins to form at the food counter. Fresh deliveries arrive continuously into the early afternoon. A lunch costs EUR 1.20. Most visitors can afford that amount, but those who cannot receive meal tickets nonetheless.

In the afternoon, the church is once again deserted. Many guests stand in the square in front, smoking, laughing, chatting. In the meantime, a medical service has also opened in a side chapel. "Many poor people do not know how they will be able to pay doctor's fees and for drugs," said Dr Regina Dipper. At 4 p.m. the Vesperkirche day comes to a close with a prayer.

Seven deacons and social educators are part of pastor Ott's team, which also includes six doctors, two veterinarians and between 30 and 45 volunteer workers daily. They all help make it possible for the Vesperkirche to regularly provide, in addition to material and medical assistance, counseling, pastoral care, cultural opportunities, worship services and prayers.

Thanks to the example set by Stuttgart, there are now 17 Vesperkirche in Baden Württemberg.

More information about the Vesperkirche can be found at: www.vesperkirche.de

The theme of the day

Context

In the Bible study today and in our worship, we explored the role of the context within which the church finds itself as we seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our decision-making. To help us find our way we examined a series of incidents involving Peter and Cornelius during a time when the followers of Jesus faced new and unexpected issues and could no longer confer with Jesus face to face to receive his guidance. Are Gentiles to be accepted as followers of Jesus and, if so, under what conditions? How did the church address such new situations in their desire to do the God-pleasing thing? How did God nurture the church through those turbulent times? How successful were they in arriving at a lasting consensus on such matters? How confident could they be that their decisions had God's approval?

In the Village Groups we now address some of the issues that are new and pressing in our own day. How will we seek to ensure that our decisions are acceptable in the sight of God?

Village Group 1:

Good soil – Clean water

Energy

Getting our bearings

☞ Let us take a few minutes to reflect on what we have heard and seen so far this morning. What stands out for you as something special and worth remembering?

The age of fossil fuels

One of the major issues at the beginning of the 21st century has to do with the world's insatiable hunger for energy. Fossil fuels are a nonrenewable resource and will soon run out. In any case, it is the use of fossil fuels that is itself responsible for most of the world's pollution. In short, the age of fossil fuels must come to an end. There seems to be almost universal agreement on that point.

Yet, with a steadily growing world population and increasing industrialization and

agricultural mechanization in many places in the world, larger and larger amounts of energy will surely be required. But that energy must increasingly come from renewable resources. Is there any doubt about this?

☞ As you explore each of the following groups of energy resources, please stop periodically to talk together about the promises and drawbacks of each. Please consider the human cost, the environmental and financial impact and the effect that all of this will have on daily life. Consider also: just how serious, really, is the power crisis?

Renewable energy

All renewable sources of energy ultimately derive from the sun, either directly or indirectly, and therefore can be expected to remain sustainable for as long as the sun will shine. This renewable energy comes to us in the form of biofuels, solar thermal power, wind power, biomass and geothermal energy, to name the most readily available forms.

☞ Is anyone here aware of large-scale programs of renewable energy production? Please tell.

Biofuels

For several reasons energy derived from biofuels is now regarded as inadequate. Biofuels cause pollution, just as do fossil fuels. The conversion of vegetable matter into energy along with ethanol subsidies cause a rise in grain prices and reduce the availability of grains for food production. One wonders about the morality of siphoning off food from the food market to feed the fuel market. The European Union Parliament's Environment Committee recently voted unanimously to reduce formerly mandated biofuel targets.

It is now argued that biofuels do hold significant promise only if they are generated out of non-food crop sources such as cellulose. The world does not just need renewable sources of energy, it needs clean energy, such as the following.

Solar thermal power

Solar thermal power is by far the earth's most readily available energy source and it is

estimated that this power is available in such amounts as to fill several times over the total present energy requirements of the planet. Photovoltaic cells convert solar light into electricity. Solar panels are especially useful for homes and they can be employed almost anywhere where the sun shines.

Since the sun shines on the average only 50 percent of the time, solar thermal energy must be supplemented with energy from other sources. The environmental impact of solar power is nil (except for the small amounts of cadmium used in the production of photovoltaic cells).

- Can some delegates tell us from their own experience about the advantages and disadvantages of using solar power?

Wind power

Wind turbines leave almost no environmental impact, aside from their huge visual presence. It is estimated that 20 to 60 percent of a country's power needs can be derived from the wind, one of the cleanest sources of energy. Countries with shallow sea shores or level plains are ideal places for wind-power generation. Newer models of turbines are less noisy than their predecessors, but they are still very expensive. Private wind farms need to partner with power companies that will distribute and manage the surplus energy when it is available.

- Can some of the delegates talk from personal experience about the use of wind power?

Nuclear power

Nuclear power is beginning fall out of favor. The immense cost of construction poses a major obstacle, as does the cost of providing safe storage of nuclear wastes. The possibility of a nuclear power plant breakdown and the resulting nuclear pollution is a major deterrent.

- Please discuss: What measures for energy management should we, as responsible stewards of the earth, advocate and personally implement? Does the picture look bleak or bright? Do you think that it might be possible to har-

vest enough energy (and at a low enough cost) to make large-scale desalination of ocean water feasible? If so, what might be some long-range effects of doing so?

Village Group 2: Sowing

Living with HIV and AIDS

Getting our bearings

- Let us take a few minutes to reflect on what we have heard and seen so far this morning. What stands out for you as something especially worth remembering?

Living with HIV and AIDS

One of the gravest challenges to human health and well-being in our world today is the HIV and AIDS epidemic. This threat has already claimed over 25 million lives and the most recent statistics indicate that some 33 million persons are currently living with the virus. These figures stagger the imagination. When after the Second World War the atrocities of the Holocaust became public knowledge, many people asked "where was God in the midst of all that suffering?" No one has yet been able to give a totally satisfactory answer to that question, but surely one of the most meaningful responses is this: "God was where God always is: right in the midst of the suffering of the world, in Jesus Christ crucified."

- Please tell some of your own stories about the extent and severity of the HIV and AIDS epidemic in your part of the world. Maybe you can also say something about the faith, hope and love that you have witnessed in that struggle.

Resources of the church

Such a situation calls for caring people to pool their insights and their resources in an effort to bind up wounds and to bring about healing. What can the

church do in the face of such pain? A preacher once asked: "When you fish one body after another out of a river, how long will it be until you ask: What is happening upstream?" Three questions come to mind: Who will raise the alarm? What can be done to revive these bodies? How can one improve the bridge across that river, so as to keep people from falling into the water in the first place?

- Please share your insights around these three areas of concern:

Advocacy

The church has established an enviable record of speaking up for the overlooked and neglected. What can be done to draw world attention to the most severe pandemic that has ever yet afflicted the earth? How can the silence of the barely surviving be turned into a high decibel shout for survival with dignity?

Compassionate care

What is it that persons living with HIV and AIDS need most? We know that with good nutrition, good bodily care and modern medicines persons living with HIV can enjoy a reasonably long and relatively healthy life. What else is the church in a unique position to provide? Think of a non-judgmental attitude, a feeling of being included, the possibility to gather as a support group—to name just a few examples. How can one ensure that such life-giving support is available when and where it is needed?

Prevention

We know that the virus that causes AIDS is passed on in two major ways: via sexual encounter and by means of contact with infected blood. In some areas in the world, sexual encounter plays the major role; in others, it is the use of contaminated needles in the drug culture. How can both be made more safe?

Reliable information

A good deal of a person's chances to live with (or free of) HIV and AIDS depends on reliable sources of information. There is a lot of such material available. There also are some "myths." Can you tell the difference between the two? Do you know how to get access

to reliable sources? What resources have you found most helpful?

- Please talk about this at some length: Since sex is such an intimate subject, many people are uncomfortable talking about it. But the cost of silence is enormous. What would help men and women to learn to talk comfortably with each other about sexuality? How does one speak tactfully with children about sexuality as an ongoing part of life?

Power imbalance and double standards

Women are almost universally expected to be intimate with only one man, while men may feel entitled to have a number of partners and to be the dominant partner in such relationships. If a woman is coerced into sexual encounters, how can she protect herself against such abuse? And if she cannot, is there not a justice issue to be dealt with? In some countries, a man who knows that he is HIV positive and yet keeps that information from his partner can be charged and convicted in a court of law.

Poverty and unemployment

There is a close connection between the severity of HIV/AIDS and economic marginalization. In some regions it is particularly the youth who are losing hope of ever securing a decent job that would enable them to become self-sufficient. In their hopelessness they often turn to drugs. Some women turn to prostitution as a means of obtaining a meager income.

- What answers to the dilemma can you suggest?

Village Group 3: Growth – Harvest

Agribusiness

Getting our bearings

- Let us take a few minutes to reflect on what we have heard and seen

so far this morning. What stands out for you as something especially worth remembering?

Farming at the crossroads

In many parts of the world, farming has changed dramatically during the past generation. Farms have steadily increased in size and decreased in number, while the number of farmers looking after them dwindles from year to year. Between the 1930s and the present, the proportion of persons in North America engaged in farming decreased from 24 percent to 1.5 percent and the average age of farmers is now almost identical with the normal age of retirement of people in other professions. Some farming couples make the newspaper headlines for remaining engaged in active farming well up into their nineties.

In many places the younger generation is rarely attracted to farming. Instead, they tend to move into larger centers—where they take jobs, leaving their parents to continue for as long as they are able before selling the farm to still larger operators. One farmer on the afternoon of their farm equipment sale a few weeks ago stated on the TV evening news: “Farming used to be an occupation, now it is a business.”

- Is the situation in your part of the world very different from the above? In what ways?

The cost of farming

Huge gas-guzzling machines, costing in the neighborhood of a quarter of a million dollars each, are necessary to allow one farming couple in Canada to tend their 2-3 square-mile property. Farm income has remained stable, at best. The farmers there find it necessary to take a second job in the city to help them make ends meet. More and more of them sooner or later find the two jobs incompatible. They decide to sell the farm and close up the “homestead.” The sense of failure associated with such a move is almost too much to bear. In some cases the farm has been passed on from parents to children for several generations. And now “you” are the one who has to bury the dreams of your grandparents who started from

scratch and built it up over the course of their entire life.

- Think about it!

When the farmer needs financial support to pay the escalating costs of fuel, fertilizers and pesticides, the banks are rarely eager to extend credit. After all, chances are that the farm will soon be sold and the person who is now asking for credit will end up in debt. Many farmers in such a desperate situation, commit suicide.

- Please tell us: Does the above description paint too dark a picture? What do you observe happening in the farming sector in your home country? Is there often a similar picture of despair and hopelessness? Do farmers generally get a fair price for their product? Are they exploited? Would entrepreneurs in other segments of society be attracted to enter the farming profession? Who benefits from this sort of agricultural business? Who loses, and what and why do they lose?

The social cost

As farms close down one after another, the local merchants go out of business and the local community dies out. Schools and churches close. Children, where they are still to be found in the country, are transported by bus to schools in the city. Eventually, one or both parents move into the city for the sake of school proximity, as well as jobs. The country gets depopulated. On the Canadian prairies one can drive for miles until one finds an inhabited farmhouse. Often the family lives in town and the husband commutes to the farm to do the field work “out there.” Large tracts of land are left almost with no one living there any longer.

On the African continent men may move into larger centers to find work, while the women work the land and produce the food. One can only imagine what sort of stress this creates for the family.

What used to be

Not so long ago, rural life was very different. Farm families were self-sup-

porting, they literally lived off the land. They planted a diversity of crops and kept animals of various kinds. They produced their own milk, eggs, chicken, pork, beef and goats, and grew a wide variety of vegetables and even fruits in the farm garden. And they enjoyed all of that produce fresh when it was in season. Today even farmers buy their produce in the store.

The farm was an integrated whole then. Chickens found their food among the weeds on the field, and they ate the bugs that caused damage to the beets in the garden. No pesticide was needed. The cows grazed on the pasture and left natural fertilizer behind—for free. The pigs “recycled” the vegetable garbage.

- Please put your heads together on this one: Is the above just a romantic dream or could farming become like that, again? Why, or why not?

Why agribusiness?

The assumption seems to be universal: agribusiness is here to stay. Only so can one hope to feed the increasing world population—so they say. But is that so? Are we sure that the hugely expensive and environmentally and socially damaging farming factory is a better producer of “food” (in its more inclusive sense) than small farming was—and maybe can be again?

- Think about it? Talk about it? Advocate for it?

Village Group 4: Processing what is harvested

Decent Work

Getting our bearings

- Let us take a few minutes to reflect on the experiences this morning in worship and in Bible study. Do you wish to identify any items for further discussion?

Work as a gift of grace from God

According to Gen 2:5, when God set to work to create humans, at least one thought (possibly even the chief thought) that prompted God to proceed was the observation that “there was no one to till the ground.” God needed workers, so God fashioned humans out of the soil. Humans, soil, and work go hand in hand. As Luther puts it: “Humans are born for work as birds are for flying.” Ten verses later the creation account has the ring of an ordination liturgy when it says: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it.” The human is being installed as a co-worker of God.

The context implies that this tilling and keeping is to be thought of as a matter of privilege. Work became drudgery only after humans had become more concerned with “feathering their own nest” than with caring for the garden and for the animals in it.

- You may wish to talk about this: How do you picture work in an ideal world where God and creation are in harmony, reconciled and at peace? Is it work? Is it play? Is it hard? What is the reward for it?

Decent work as a human right

The concept of “decent work” has been coined only relatively recently. Apparently it was first articulated by the Director General of the International Labour Organization in the 1999 Report under the title “Decent Work.” The author proposes a rather comprehensive definition of it.

Decent work is all of the following. It is work in sufficient quantity and quality; it is productive work, work that is rewarded with adequate pay. It is protected as a right, it includes social coverage, and it is subject to social dialogue and participation (i.e. collective bargaining). It is rendered under conditions of freedom, security, and dignity, it guarantees equal access to employment, it is free from exploitation, and it desires equal pay for equal work irrespective of the age or gender of the worker. It is centered on people.

Such work, it is argued, is the only possible way out of poverty.

- Please take some time to talk about this: Evidently, the above is a description of what is desirable and, one hopes, achievable. Does it reasonably accurately reflect what your present job is actually like? What items in this list do you value most highly, and which of these characteristics have you actually experienced in your working life? Which characteristics of “decent work” have you seen listed in a job offer or a newspaper advertisement?

Access to decent work

Securing decent work can be quite a challenge. Competition between governments makes it all the more so. Some governments impose protectionist market restrictions as a means of maintaining their own competitive edge on the international scene. Businesses try to keep wages as low as possible to enable them to make a larger profit. The result is more unemployment and poorer laborers at home. Worst of all, workers lose the joy of working. Their profession becomes a “job,” or worse: it becomes slave labor.

- Please have a good talk about this: What is work all about? What is the connection between “working” and “living?” Are the two descriptors identical or are they opposites? Why do you work? Do you work because you enjoy what you do, or do you work in the hope that you may be able to save enough money so that you can quit working? The answers you give to these questions will help you determine whether you have a “decent” job or perform slave labor (to put it crassly).

Work as vocation

Luther maintained that everyone should have a sense of her or his life and work as a calling from God—a vocation. In the sight of God (said Luther), the vocation of a milkmaid is as honorable as is the vocation of, say, a bishop or a clergy person. It is

not what you do that gives your life dignity, but whether you can do it as a responsible service of gratitude to God and to your neighbor.

Mother Basilea Schlink, borrowing from the much-quoted statement by Wilhelm Löhe, said: “My reward is that I may do this.”

- What do you think she meant by these words?

Village Group 5: Breaking the bread – Sharing solidarity

Divided church in a divided world

Getting our bearings

- What have you heard and seen so far, today? What thoughts and feelings have arisen for you as you participated in worship, Bible study and conversation? Can we take a few minutes to talk about that?

A divided church?

To say that the world is a divided place is to state the obvious. But conflict in the church? One would hope that among the people who follow the *Prince of Peace* there is perfect harmony. It comes as a disappointment to discover that this is not necessarily so. The people of God do not cease being humans buffeted by sin. The biblical story is the story of those humans in their faith-walk. It may sometimes serve as a model that invites imitation, and sometimes as an admonition to proceed with caution.

Recent struggles

The Bible study today reflects on a particularly conflictual period in the history of the Early Church.

- In this Village Group discussion we want to talk about the church’s more recent encounters with divisive issues.

- Please tell your stories about this: How has your church handled disagreements in the past? Can you talk about recent disagreements that have now been settled (more or less permanently)?

Different regions of the church will no doubt have addressed quite different issues. For example, in your congregation, synod or region, have you agonized over whether children should be admitted to communion; whether the church should protect an illegal immigrant; whether the worship service could include dancing and shouting; whether women could be ordained? Other? For the sake of clarity it may be advisable to restrict yourself to one or two such potentially divisive issues.

Looking at the encounter afterwards

After the dust of a disagreement has settled somewhat, the issues involved very often take on greater or less significance in our lives. Sometimes we wonder why the issues were debated with such passion in the first place.

As you think back to when the “heat” of the discussion was very high, do you yourself still hold the same views on the matter that you did then? If not, what was it that caused you to change your mind? Do you think that you now have a better or a worse grasp on the importance of the matter that was discussed back then? What has changed?

The unity of the church

It is clear that the unity of the church is a primary value for all Christians, and certainly for Lutherans. Does that mean that a church should not take action on matters that might divide the church? One Lutheran church body voted for the ordination of women in full awareness that such a vote would prompt another Lutheran body to withdraw from the merger negotiations in which both had been engaged up to that point. What do you think about that?

Keeping the main thing the main thing

When we discuss vital issues in the church, it is important that we do not lose sight of the central values of our faith.

- What would you say is the primary conviction to be maintained, and how will our decision-making be affected by it? Justification by the grace of God, perhaps? “Love one another as I have loved you, perhaps?” Other? Why?

What will our (Christian and non-Christian) neighbors say?

- How important is it to you that the church have a good reputation? Should the church be more concerned about protecting its public image than about harboring a political dissident, for instance?

The dignity and self-respect of disputants

- During the encounter that you have chosen to revisit during the present discussion, did you remain respectful of people who held opposite points of view? Could people speak their mind openly without fear of losing face? Could everyone walk away with their dignity and self-respect intact? Was it clear that participants in the discussion acted in good faith and out of a deep desire to be faithful disciples?

Pastoral sensitivity?

- Please talk about this: Should the church discuss and bring to a vote only such issues as are not likely to disturb the unity of the church? Should potentially divisive matters be kept off the discussion table? Should the church work for consensus rather than make decisions by majority vote? What are the most important issues that the church should raise for public attention and debate, and why? What should be the church’s main concern in addressing controversial matters in the world today and why?



A staple food

Potatoes

“It is easy to halve the potato where there is love.”
(Irish saying)

Potatoes are the world’s fourth largest food crop, following rice, wheat and maize. They are generally grown from the eyes of another potato and not from seed, and correct potato husbandry is an arduous task. The potato’s yield of calories per acre is higher than that of maize, rice, wheat or soybean.

Potatoes are prepared in many ways. The only requirement involves cooking to break down the starch. Common dishes are mashed, baked, boiled, steamed, roasted or french-fried potatoes; potato pancakes or dumplings made from grated potatoes. Potato chunks commonly appear as a stew ingredient.

Originating in Peru, the potato was introduced to Europe in 1536 and, although initially feared to be poisonous, it soon became an important food staple. Famines in the early 1770s contributed to acceptance, as did government policies in several European countries and climate change during the Little Ice Age.

When Catherine the Great of Russia ordered her subjects to cultivate the tuber, the Orthodox Church warned that potatoes were suspect because they were not in the Bible, and many ignored her order.

Lack of genetic diversity left potatoes vulnerable to disease and in 1845, a plant disease known as late blight resulted in the crop failures that led to the Great Irish Famine.

The potato remains an essential crop especially in eastern and central Europe where per capita production is still the highest in the world.