

Lutheran Education Australia Conference

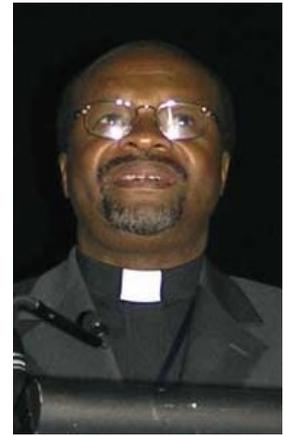
*"Cross Currents: Charting a Course in a Sea of Diversity"*

## ***Global Challenges and Currents in Contemporary Society***

**Keynote Address by**

**Rev. Dr Ishmael Noko**

**General Secretary, The Lutheran World Federation, Geneva**



Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends, I am pleased to be once again in Australia since my previous two visits in the years 1996 and 2000. In addition to providing me with an excellent excuse to visit your country again, I consider it an honour and a privilege to address this important conference of Lutheran Education Australia. The long history of Lutheran education in Australia and its growing role in the formation of the young people of this nation is something to be proud of. On behalf of the Lutheran World Federation, I wish to acknowledge and affirm this important Lutheran contribution geared towards the building of a 'good or decent society' in our global village currently in so much need of healing.

### **The Theme: "Cross Currents: Charting a Course in a Sea of Diversity"**

The theme chosen for this conference is both timely, and of critical importance. It presents, in my view, the central challenge for this generation. It appropriately describes the context in which we live and work as a 'sea of diversity', therefore implying that navigation through this 'sea of 1 diversity' to our intended destination is impeded by countless and complex 'cross-currents'. Since the conference theme does not spell out the intended destination to be reached through the charting of this course, I have bestowed upon myself the liberty to name such a destination.

For me, one of the basic and fundamental purposes of education and educational institutions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the building of a 'good society' through the difficult process of transforming the 'human race' into a 'human family'. It goes without saying that those responsible for the education of our children and youth will have a transformative influence on whether and how this objective is reached.

### **Globalization, and the 'Sea of Diversity'**

The context from which the 'good society' must be built is indeed a 'sea of diversity'. Through the processes of globalization many of us have come into closer contact with a far larger sample of that diversity than was the case in previous period of human history. Increasing international travel and trade, immigration and other population flows, and especially the advances in communication technology since the mid-1990s, have widened our view of the world. In our global village, we can now see a lot more of our neighbours than before, even if we do so through opaque glass walls that give us a glimpse of each other but still prevent us from meeting. For the church, this means that people of those nations whom we loved and cared for to the extent that we sent missionary pastors, medical personnel and teachers, are now waiting for our love and care across the street or in the refugee camps within our national borders.

In this connection let us not forget that the church has always defined itself as a supra-national entity – as a global community that transcends all political, ethnic, tribal and other human

boundaries. In his letter to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul unequivocally says, "There is neither Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).

And yet, despite the subscription to this globalized self-understanding the Church has for much of her history tended to reduce herself to separate nationalist entities. Have we not seen and have we not been part of the church structures that divide the body of Christ along the lines of self - imposed boundaries? In this regard it is of paramount importance to note that the formation of a Christian world communion such as the Lutheran World Federation results from the realization that most of the national and historical differences among the various Lutheran churches are not communion dividing.

Since its formation in 1947, the Lutheran World Federation has moved beyond the recognition of mere commonalities, to defining itself as a communion of churches, now numbering 138 in 77 countries, of approximately 65 million people around the world. In this communion, churches from different cultures, with different histories and traditions, different liturgies and spiritualities, (except a few) are joined together in altar and pulpit fellowship. This is a significant shift in our ecclesiology- self-understanding. And the effect that this shift has on our approach to the challenge of diversity , and our response to human suffering, is ( or should be) fundamental. Our responses must then be grounded in our oneness in Christ – and in compassion, rather than mere sympathy.

And yet, on one hand, we cannot underestimate the fear and uncertainty that results from diversity. Those who fear the loss of their identity have sometimes reacted in negative, extreme or even violent ways. This fear, and the radical re-assertion of identity, is at the core of some of the main global challenges confronting us today, and which I will discuss in more detail later.

### **Charting an Inclusive Course**

Let me now turn to the objective towards which we strive in this 'sea of diversity': the unity of the human family, and the building of a 'good society'. Central to the Biblical message is the belief that every human being is created in the image of God and that through the Christ event we are made acceptable before God. Therefore the exclusion of anyone on the basis of gender, race, colour, nationality, class, language, religion, political opinion or any other basis offends against the image of God in that person.

Because diversity is often difficult to deal with, inclusiveness does not come naturally or easily to us. Cultural and historical factors often impede our capacity to accept and tolerate. Tolerance has its limits, of course, in the case of actions that harm others. But acceptance of the person is nonetheless a calling that derives from very fundamental faith principles. The alternative - exclusion and isolation - is clearly not a Christ-like response to human diversity.

### **Cross Currents: Exclusion and Isolation**

Despite this, exclusion and isolation has all too frequently marked our dealings with each other, both in the past and present. For example, the founders of the Lutheran church in Australia left the security of their European homeland to escape a situation in which political pressure left no space for diversity in religious practice. They came to Australia following a vision of a 'good society' in which their religious freedom would be assured. In this respect, they had much in common with the 'Pilgrim Fathers' (and Mothers) in what is now the United States of America.

At the same time, the intolerance they faced at home led them to a choice that was by definition a closed and exclusive one. It excluded those from whom they had separated in

their original homelands who did not, in their view, share the pure unadulterated truth of the faith. It was an act of isolationism from the diverse and difficult reality of the church and the world. This dilemma and the heritage it created continue to have great impact on our psychologies and ecclesiologies even today.

### **Cross Currents: Immigrant Societies and Indigenous Peoples**

The immigrant societies that these pioneers founded or joined -in both Australia and the United States -were established at the expense of the indigenous peoples of the 'New World'. The relationship between such immigrant societies and the indigenous peoples of the land is a matter that remains as a key issue for the construction of a 'good society'.

From the little that I know of Lutheran mission in Australia, I have the impression that the Lutheran missionaries to the Aboriginal peoples of this land were culturally sensitive. At least the Good News was brought to the people in their own languages, unlike in some other places such as in my own continent Africa, where cultural and linguistic assimilation preceded the preaching of the Gospel. I do not doubt that the translation of the Scriptures into numerous Aboriginal languages has helped to preserve some of those languages and cultures from extinction.

At the same time, as in all other places where indigenous peoples are still struggling for recognition and rights, there is unfinished business between the 'immigrant society' of majority Australia and its indigenous hosts. The enormity of the gap in health, education and living standards between Aboriginal people and majority Australia is a sufficient indictment by itself. A 'good society' cannot accept this situation. But neither can the solution be imposed, or achieved by money alone. For peoples that emphasize spirituality as strongly as indigenous peoples do, material solutions will not suffice. Attitudes must be transformed, in both the majority population and indigenous populations, to accept the capacity and responsibility of indigenous peoples for self-determination and self-reliance.

This is not a uniquely Australian problem. The same or similar issues are still to be confronted in reaching a just accommodation with communities as diverse as the First Nations of the USA and Canada, the indigenous peoples of Latin America, the Sami of the Nordic region, the San of Southern Africa and the Tribals of India. The Tenth Assembly of the LWF, which was held in Winnipeg, Canada, in July 2003, included a strong focus on indigenous questions. Within the LWF family, there are many experiences and a great deal of expertise to share. It will be our task in the years ahead to provide forums and processes in which this sharing can take place.

### **Cross Currents: Poverty, Economic Globalization and the Growing Gap between Rich and Poor**

Poverty, that original social concern of the church, continues to be an overwhelming source of division and despair in the world. Poverty persists in our societies as much as the result of discrimination and exclusion, as of economic deprivation. The poor are excluded because they are poor, and this exclusion perpetuates and institutionalizes their poverty.

Once upon a time economic globalization was believed to have the potential to lift unprecedented numbers of people out of poverty. However, the outcomes of trade and financial liberalization in many parts of the world have been deeply ambiguous when judged according to standards of justice and ethics. Today, the global market is ever more clearly seen as an engine for the creation of even greater wealth for the wealthy, and a closed door to the poor and 'un-competitive'. The era of economic globalization has been an era of a rapidly growing gulf between the rich and the poor. Those who have been excluded by this process – the unemployed, the homeless, the destitute – are increasingly visible in almost all of the countries I have visited, both in the developing and the developed world.

The 'good society' would require that economic policy be re-focused on the *oikos*, the human household, and directed to the enhancement of human dignity for all. It has been wisely said that the measure of a 'good society' is based on a simple criteria, ie on how it treats its poor and disadvantaged. The dispossession, homelessness and despair increasingly visible in many contemporary societies are an indictment of our lack of inclusiveness, and our rejection of those who are unable or unwilling to 'compete'.

The challenge for the Lutheran communion will be to define ways in which to respond to economic globalization as a communion. We are all of us part of the one body of Christ. If part of the body suffers, all suffer. The Lord's Prayer is a community prayer; we pray to "our" father, not "my" father. And when we pray "give us our daily bread", we are praying that bread be delivered to all tables. How can we, in our economic relations, act in ways that are consistent with this prayer?

### **Cross Currents: HIV/AIDS, Stigma and Exclusion**

HIV / AIDS pandemic is one of the mind-boggling 'cross-currents' in our 'sea of diversity', posing an existential threat to the health of our societies and churches, not only in the worst affected parts of the world, but in the entire world. For example, in Botswana -with an HIV prevalence of over 35% -the future of the nation itself is in the balance. Almost every family is touched by the disease. Though Africa is often seen as the epicentre of this pandemic, the disease knows no boundaries, and its impacts in this one region have been recognized as affecting the security of the world as a whole. HIV/AIDS in one part of the world is HIV/AIDS everywhere.

But still we try to minimize or avoid our own responsibilities in the face of this crisis. When our societies stigmatize people living with HIV / AIDS, we conspire to defeat ourselves in the fight against the disease. When churches exclude those affected by HIV/AIDS, we reject Christ's call to compassion.

Many churches have, however, heard this call and have responded in faith and action. As part of the ecumenical mobilization against AIDS, the LWF has articulated a response that involves the three elements of compassion, conversion and care. Compassion means that we acknowledge that each person living with HIV / AIDS is made in the image of God; he or she is Christ in our midst, made vulnerable by this disease, and deeply in need of the church's unconditional love, acceptance and support. Conversion means that the church itself is called by Christ to repent of how it has sinned against those who are affected by HIV/AIDS; it is called to love those whom it has shunned. Care refers to the treatment, prevention and advocacy that we provide and promote.

Our challenge, in addition to an effective diaconic response, is to reflect on how to be church in a time of AIDS. Christ called into being the Church including the rejected and outcasts of society. If Christ is our model and guide, how will we respond to those who our societies have rejected because of their HIV status:- with acceptance and compassion, or with judgment and exclusion?

### **Cross Currents: Racism and Casteism**

One of the most ancient and persistent forms of exclusion is that based on race. Racism was not only a 20<sup>th</sup> century South African phenomenon; nor was it defeated with the fall of apartheid. It is, I regret to say, a powerful and persistent undercurrent in all human societies. The physical differences associated with race are the strongest anchor to which our propensity for exclusion has attached.

However, the struggle against apartheid, and its ultimate success, has masked the many other more subtle and often equally pernicious forms of racism. Racism continues, not only in South Africa and not only by 'Whites' against 'Blacks'. In Sudan, both in Darfur and in the

civil war in the south of the country, the conflict is based on racism by Sudanese of Arab descent against 'Black African' Sudanese. In Israel-Palestine, the conflict has strong racist undercurrents. In many Asian countries, racism against foreigners is an unacknowledged but obvious reality. Indigenous peoples throughout the world continue to suffer from racism in their own ancestral lands. And in my own country, I am disturbed and saddened to observe the emergence of a racist political ideology amongst those who fought against such an ideology in the past.

It is in the nature of this deeply-rooted human prejudice that it should re-appear in many new guises and with many different pretexts. The terrorist attacks and atrocities perpetrated by certain Arab Muslim groups and individuals has encouraged prejudice against all Arabs (as well as feeding anti-Muslim sentiment). The most objectionable actions of the Government of Israel in the occupied Palestinian territories have given increased credibility to anti-Semites. The undoubted difficulties of fulfilling international commitments with regard to refugees and asylum-seekers have served as rationalizations for policies that are, quite frankly, racist.

However, the ubiquity and persistence of racism is no excuse for inaction. Commitment to the unity of the human family, and the recognition of the image of God in every human being, demand the rejection and uprooting of racism wherever it appears.

The LWF has also made the issue of casteism, and in particular the extreme form of exclusion suffered by the Dalits of South Asia, one of its key priorities. A number of the Lutheran churches in India are comprised almost entirely of members of this community, formerly known as 'untouchables'. By their birth, Dalits are defined as being impure and polluting and less than human, and are ascribed the most degrading roles in society. They are estimated to number up to 250 million people, but they nevertheless represent an excluded and marginalized minority in India and elsewhere.

The difficulties we faced with regard to visas for delegates to attend the LWF's Tenth Assembly in Canada last year was a small but illustrative example of the current situation in the world. In previous LWF Assemblies, obtaining visas for delegates has hardly ever been an insurmountable difficulty. The most serious previous occasion was when two delegates from Taiwan were denied visas to attend the Sixth Assembly in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania. Last year, however, Canada denied visas for 5Q delegates to the Tenth Assembly -and all of them from African or Asian countries, all of them Dalits, or indigenous people, or black Africans.

### **Cross Currents: War and Violence**

War and violence is today, perhaps more than ever before, impressed on our global conscience. Images of the violence in Iraq are on our TV screens almost every night. The conflict in Darfur, Sudan, has belatedly achieved international prominence. Other conflicts continue to rage out of the media spotlight, in Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, northern Nigeria, and elsewhere. Meanwhile, terrorism and the so-called 'war on terrorism' have become the dominating issue in international relations, to the exclusion of almost all others.

A number of the conflicts in today's world are portrayed as religious conflicts. The civil war in Sudan, the intermittent clashes in northern Nigeria and parts of Indonesia, the recent upsurge in global terrorism and the war on terrorism itself are often seen in this light. However, in my view, there is really no such thing as a 'religious war' in the contemporary world. Invariably in these situations, religious diversity has been manipulated for other - usually political - ends. People of one community have been actively encouraged to see all those belonging to the other community as enemies. These constructed 'enemy images' are the real source of conflict.

I do not wish to be misunderstood on this point. There will always be extremists whose method and goal is death and the annihilation of the other. They must be prevented from carrying out the sort of atrocities that have occurred recently in Beslan, in Kirkuk, and on an almost daily basis in Israel-Palestine. But the greater threat is that they may succeed in provoking a wider confrontation. My fear in the current global context is that we, the peoples of the world, our political leaders, and all too many religious leaders, have permitted these extremists to hijack the course of our history.

I am convinced that, in our global village, the idea of national security no longer has the relevance it once had. A new concept of human security is emerging, recognizing the increasingly borderless and interdependent nature of the world today. If recent history has demonstrated nothing else, it has shown that there is no guarantee of security in even the most powerful of military arsenals. True human security in the global village will require the unresolved hatreds, alienation, and economic and social injustices of the world to be genuinely addressed.

Australia finds itself caught between the horns of the current global dilemma. Australia, a country that is by force of geography isolated from the rest of the world -in actual fact, the rest of the world is isolated from Australia – now finds itself engaged in the centre of the world's most prominent crisis. And for the first time in almost two generations, Australians find that they have enemies in the world. Why is this so, and how to respond? These are likely to be questions that will remain for the young Australians being educated in your schools today to resolve.

### **Living with Diversity: The Importance of Structures and Procedures**

In the experience of the LWF, structures and procedures have demonstrated their value in the orderly management of our life together in diversity. Among those instruments is the LWF Assembly, which occurs every 6 or 7 years, and to which all member churches are entitled to send representatives. At an Assembly, representatives of all LWF member churches have the opportunity to see the full diversity of the LWF in physical form. More importantly, they have the opportunity to experience that diversity not as an abstraction, but as other human beings, women and men. Between Assemblies, an elected Council -drawn from all the regions in which the member churches are present -is responsible for managing the life and work of the LWF.

Structures and procedures such as these provide a framework in which our various perspectives and concerns can be shared and processed. They help to contain the fears and anxieties that might otherwise intrude in our relationships and threaten to tear them apart. In addition, I believe that the element of personal encounter which these structures and processes entail is crucial for our togetherness. In a context in which diversity is not understood or accepted and in which we have not encountered 'the others' as human beings, we are very susceptible to manipulation of our opinions. On the other hand, where we have met and established a personal relationship with people from the other group or community, it will be relatively harder for us to accept gross generalizations about that group or community.

### **The Transformative Power of Inter-Faith 'Diapraxis'**

In the current global context, inter-religious relations has become one of the most burning issues. Rising fundamentalism and extremism is evident in elements of many of the world's major religions, Christianity included. These fundamentalist and extremist influences typically have a strong political connection and agenda. They are leading us rapidly towards the 'clash of civilizations'. In my view, religious leaders have a responsibility to resist the 'capture' of their traditions by such elements, and to avoid being manipulated for political purposes.

Inter-religious dialogue has a long history, during which a much wider circle of religious

leaders have become open to dialogue with people of other faiths. But in the current context, something more than dialogue among the leadership is required. Some strong criticism of current models of inter-faith encounter is emerging, including from committed 'dialoguers' themselves. Inter-faith dialogue is increasingly being described by some as a 'middle class pastime' that does not engage the realities of the grassroots communities of faith. Certainly, we now have many noble inter-faith declarations, but too little implementation of the sentiments contained therein.

For my part, I believe that deeper and more active sort of relationship is required; a process of living and working together, as well as of talking together. The relationship must be based on the identification of common concerns, and commitment to active cooperation in addressing those concerns. In the LWF, we call this sort of relationship 'diapaxis'.

Typically, the common concerns identified as a basis for diapaxis will not be primarily theological in nature, but very practical. As an example, in the process of Christian-Jewish dialogue, we on the Christian side may have a desire to explore the deep theological questions of the relationship between the covenants with the Jewish people and the Covenant in Christ. But this concern is not necessarily shared by the Jewish participants in this relationship. Their primary concern is, quite simply, that there should be less anti-Semitism. That, however, is a point at which our interests can intersect, and on which we can work together as well as talk together.

In the world today, conflict and violence – especially with a religious connection – is a basic common concern. At the most fundamental level, we all share the hope for a more peaceful and safer world for our children. On the basis of this shared hope, we have a firm foundation for working together. It is this foundation on which we, in October 2002, brought together over 100 religious leaders from across the geographical and faith spectrum in Africa to discuss and agree on practical initiatives for working together for peace in Africa. All of the seven major faith traditions in Africa -Christianity, Islam, African Traditional Religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and the Baha'i faith - were represented. The participants adopted a Declaration, and more importantly, a Plan of Action, in which they recognized their common concern for peace in Africa, and outlined a series of joint actions.

### **Encounter and Experience: Meeting the 'Other'**

In this and other such initiatives, in which those who have been apart begin to cooperate with each other, it is the personal relationships that develop in the process that will provide the path to peace. The personal encounter with the 'oilier', and the experience of our common humanity and similar concerns and hopes for the future, begin to transform the 'human race' into a 'human family'.

### **Conclusion: The Role of Education and Educators**

The church, the mosque, the synagogue and the temple all have the unquestionable obligation to educate for peace and co-existence. But we know that these are also holy places where we tend to emphasize our own special identities. In the light of the limitations of these holy places, I have hope in schools and educational institutions. They have the potential to provide a context in which we can search for the common identity that binds us together.

Indeed, Lutheran schools in Australia and elsewhere are already in the vanguard of this process on behalf of the Lutheran churches. Originally, the purpose of Lutheran schools may have been to care for the 'flock', or, where there was no existing Lutheran community, to serve as an instrument for evangelism. But in the changing social landscape their role has evolved and expanded. In your schools you have long been instruments of encounter with diversity. The presence in Lutheran schools of so many students and teachers of other Christian denominations represents an advance ecumenical commitment that has undoubtedly set the stage for other forms of ecumenical engagement and cooperation. The growing

presence of students of other faiths in your educational communities is a nursery for inter-faith encounter and personal relationships that build bridges of peace. In addition, the increasing presence of students from other countries brings young Australians of a range of different backgrounds into contact with the wider world.

I am aware that students from Asia have been coming to Australian schools and universities in large numbers for a long time. However, I was surprised on a recent trip home to southern Africa to discover how many young people from my region are now going to Australia to study. It seems that Australia is rapidly becoming the educator of the world. But it is also true that this international presence in your schools is a learning opportunity for Australia.

You are aware, I know, of the valuable resource and pedagogical opportunity represented by the diversity in your school communities. It provides a basis for an educational experience that will prepare the young people in your charge for the challenges of global citizenship in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It enables you to promote and establish co-existence, at a time when there is no other path to a just, peaceful and secure future in our global village.

To grasp such an opportunity, it is necessary to be intentional. The existing diversity in your communities provides the raw materials. A clear focus must be given to the creation of curricula, structures and processes that present and explore this diversity and that promote encounter, while at the same time containing the initial fears and anxieties that might arise. The intentional preparation of teachers for this role will be required, since diversity is difficult to deal with and demands special skills and sensitivity. Teachers must first be equipped to accept and embrace diversity themselves, before they can equip others. Lutheran education from the perspective of Martin Luther and Philip Melancton was intended to equip the ordinary believers. Theirs was education for life.

Australia, the educator of the world, can also become a navigator towards the unity of the human family through this mutual pedagogical experience of diversity. Lutheran education, already in the vanguard of this process on behalf of the Lutheran churches, can lead the way. Lutheran traditions and faith principles, in particular our traditional Lutheran emphasis on love for one's neighbour, and new understandings of the implications of communion, can provide important foundations for a response to this challenge. The Lutheran World Federation is ready to be your partner in this process, and to offer you and your students additional opportunities to experience the diversity of the world. Can you envisage, for example, an education summit drawing together representatives from Lutheran schools around the world? Such a summit would seek ways to refocus Lutheran educational resources in order to better contribute towards a 'good society' and 21<sup>st</sup> century citizenship.

In my language, we have a saying that if you educate your son in English, he will never be buried at home. This saying expresses a recognition by the mothers and fathers of Africa of the advent of globalization and its impact on the family. It is tinged with sadness and regret. But it also looks with hope to a future in which the sons and daughters of Africa, or of Australia, or of any other part of the world, will be at home everywhere. Our task as educators is to guide them beyond the barriers of culture, across the shores of tradition, through the fears of the present, to the 'good society' and the family that embraces all humanity. If there is any community of people and institutions that will prepare the next generation for 21<sup>st</sup> century citizenship, it is none other than the teachers and our educational institutions.