

DEMOCRACY AT RISK: A RESPONSE OF THE FAITH COMMUNITY

Following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, who came...

*...to bring good news to the poor,
to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4)...*

...we cannot be silent.

Throughout today's world the institution of democracy is under serious threat. The rise of authoritarianism, accompanied by economic imperialism and enforced by military power, is taking away the ability of large numbers of people to determine how they desire to live together. In the United States, as in the larger world, the divide between the wealthy and the poor is reaching intolerable levels. Immigrants who once dreamed of finding refuge and opportunity in this country are being forced to leave. In part this new imperial worldview is being driven by a belief that this nation is morally exceptional to all others and that White Christians in particular possess a special calling from God, not only to lead but to dominate. Rooted in the gospel of Christ, shaped by the heritage of the Protestant Reformation and inspired by the courageous witness of the Confessing Church of Germany^[1] in its opposition to a Nazified church, we commit ourselves to non-violently resist these trends. This is our response.

1. *So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1: 27)*
- We affirm the God-given sanctity of all life and the essential dignity and equality of all people. Though scattered globally, we are a single family.

Quite simply, this means that we cannot regard anyone as being outside or inferior or less deserving, regardless of race, sex, or gender identity or expression, national origin, citizen status, age, religion, sexual orientation, ability, or political or economic views.

- We confess that we continually, through our attitudes, speech and actions, individually and as a group, favor some and denigrate others. We have been silent in the face of injustice, the abuse of people and desecration of God's natural creation.
- We are grateful for a Reformation heritage that acknowledges and affirms that all people are of equal worth and dignity, created in God's image. In its insistence that God's free grace is a gift for all people, the Reformation laid the foundation for the global affirmation of universally-guaranteed human rights.
- We therefore reject any and all forms of prejudice based on race, sex, or gender identity or expression, national origin, citizen status, age, religion, sexual orientation, ability, political or economic views. We will call out prejudice within ourselves and our communities. We reject any and all expressions of antisemitism. Discrimination against Jews in word or in deed will not be tolerated among us. Nor will we tolerate discrimination against Muslims, Blacks, Indigenous peoples, Roma, Sinti, Dalits or other minoritized groups, whether this is evidenced in personal relationships or in the policies of public or private institutions.

We commit ourselves

- to affirm and welcome to worship and ministry all people, including those of a different caste, nation or sexual orientation. We will fight for their full acceptance and inclusion in all dimensions of church and social life.
- to explore the common bonds of faith and value that exist between the church and other faith communities, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and others, working together with them on projects that serve the common good.
- to work for social and environmental justice for all of God's creation.

2. *For all the nations belong to you! (Psalm 82: 8) There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3: 28)*

- We affirm our faith in the one God who created heaven and earth, who redeems the whole of creation, and whose message of hope embraces all. The gods of blood and soil, family, race, nation and ideology are gods of injustice. They are ultimately powerless before the one God who alone is sovereign.
- We confess that we have cloaked our nation and our ideologies with symbols of our faith in an illicit attempt to give them ultimate value. We have put flags in our chancels, sung nationalistic hymns, preached and prayed in ways that confer ultimate value on one nation above all others. We confess the fact that masses of poor and marginalized people in numerous countries are the victims of the exploitative economic and trade policies that have, in large part, been established to grant special privilege to our country.
- We are grateful for the heritage of the Reformation and its insistence that no earthly object of loyalty, whether nation, blood, soil, ideology or institution, including the church itself, can be accorded ultimate status. As Martin Luther insisted, "We must fear, love and trust in God above all things." To do otherwise is idolatry.
- We therefore reject the illegitimate claims of any nation to be morally exceptional to all others. We reject in particular the Doctrine of Discovery by which European nations claimed the right to colonize and exploit the lands of indigenous peoples in North and South. Although repudiated by the Vatican, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and other church bodies, this doctrine remains a weapon of dominance and exploitation.

We commit ourselves

- to the ongoing reformation of the church in the light of its central affirmation of redemption of all people through the free grace we know in Christ. We will seek, furthermore, to hold the symbols of faith separate from symbols of the nation by removing national flags

from our houses of worship and nationalistic songs from our worship books.

- to pursue the healing process with Native Peoples following the scandal of indigenous boarding schools sanctioned by the Doctrine of Discovery.
- to oppose the many forms of religious nationalism, whether Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Shinto or Buddhist, that seek to provide religious rationale for a nation's claim to having special virtue, wisdom, privilege or a special calling from God to hold power over others.
- to encourage our church leaders to come together in the spirit of the Barmen Declaration (1934) to achieve a consensus on our united opposition to the ideology of Christian nationalism.

3. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Genesis 12: 2-3)

- We affirm the ancient covenant of God with Abraham and its meaning for *all* the families of the earth. We acknowledge the special role played in the conveyance of this blessing by the families of the children of Abraham, namely Judaism, Christianity and Islam. We acknowledge that the promise of the land was never meant to be unconditional or to be understood as a privilege. Rather the promise of the land carries with it a covenant responsibility to ensure that it can be a blessing for all the nations.
- We confess that our Lutheran tradition contains elements that have been unjustly demeaning of and harmful to the Jewish people. Martin Luther has made statements and written tracts against Judaism that are repugnant and have caused great harm. The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) has rightly distanced its member churches from these statements.
- We confess that some among us who claim to follow Christ have made derogatory statements against both Jews and Muslims, fueling the fires of antisemitism and Islamophobia. The ideology of Christian Zionism in particular is a heresy, a false narrative that distorts Jewish, Muslim and

Christian teachings. By transforming the Israeli--Palestinian conflict into a religious conflict, Christian Zionism is distorting all three Abrahamic faith traditions while creating widespread hostility and alienation.

- We confess that we have been silent in the face of the harmful claims made by both Palestinian and Israeli extremists. Most destructive have been claims made by both Hamas (in the Charter of the Islamic Resistance Movement) and by members of the Cabinet of the Government of Israel who claim a God-given exclusive right to the whole land, from the Nile to the Euphrates.
- We confess that some among us have been silent in the face of growing violence in the Holy Land. After decades of violent oppression against the Palestinian people, Hamas carried out a massacre of Israeli Jews on October 7, 2023. This is to be categorically condemned along with the abuse of civilians taken hostage. We likewise condemn the retaliatory bombing of civilian population centers by the Government of Israel. Relentless bombings directed not only against Hamas militants but against large segments of the Palestinian community have killed over 60,000 and maimed over 150,000 people, primarily women and children. Thousands still remain buried beneath the rubble. This is nothing short of genocide. In its provision of bombs to the Israeli Defense Force for this purpose, the United States has been an accomplice to this genocide.
- We confess further that we have made only a feeble response to the *Nakba* (the Catastrophe), the violent displacement and dispossession of Arab Palestinians that began in 1948. With much of the global community, we have stood by as illegal settlements have been built on Arab land and as the human and civil rights of Palestinians have been violated and the suppression of Palestinian culture has been carried out by the State of Israel. We have been all too silent as the illegal Israeli occupation denies Palestinians their civil, national and political rights.
- We are grateful for the heritage of the Reformation and its clear affirmation of civil authority as a gift of God to maintain peace, justice and good order in society. At the same time, we acknowledge the legitimacy of the Reformation's call for resistance by the citizenry when the ruling authority becomes cruel and unjust (Martin Luther's treatise, *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*). Following the counsel of St. Peter and the Apostles that "we must obey God rather than any human authority" (Acts 5:29), we support the churches of the Holy Land and commend them for their commitment to non-violent resistance to decades of oppressive rule.

- We reject the claims of Jewish and Muslim fundamentalists that God has given them the land unconditionally, from the Nile to the Euphrates. It is this claim that has undercut all peace negotiations and is presently making a two-state solution virtually impossible. We also reject the ideology of Christian Zionism, its unbiblical worldview, its misuse of scripture, as well as its present employment as a weapon against the Palestinian people. We reject claims by the government of the United States to any ownership of Gaza and to any right to develop it for its own purposes.

We commit ourselves

- to advocate and promote self-determination for the Palestinian people. We continue to advocate a negotiated settlement that guarantees that Israelis and Palestinians will be able to live together in peace and security. We commit ourselves to advocate that Jerusalem be a shared capital for the three religions, namely, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and for the two nations of Palestine and Israel. Thus, we support the comprehensive Arab League's Plan of March 4, 2025.^[21]
- to speak out against the destruction of the people and infrastructure of Gaza that is being carried out by the State of Israel. As long as the illegal Israeli occupation continues, we call on the United States and other nations to cease to provide military armaments. We call on all parties to cease hostilities immediately.
- to speak out against threats made by members of the Israeli Cabinet and their allies that call for the forced removal of the Palestinians of Gaza from their ancestral homeland.
- to vigorously oppose the claim of the United States to have a right to own, develop and exploit the territory of Gaza
- to empower the Palestinian Christians to use their unique position as a balancing power to initiate dialogue and help broker a just peace. We also want to assure Palestinian Christians that we are grateful for the significant role they are playing in the ministries of health, education and reconciliation, critical functions that benefit all people regardless of gender, ethnicity, nationality, religious and political affiliation.

4. *For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Galatians 5:14)*

- We affirm the centrality of this biblical mandate as manifest in the life and ministry of Jesus where it takes on its most radical meaning, namely, to take special care to love, include and serve those who are marginalized, excluded or denied health care, food or the basic material goods needed to sustain life.
- We confess the fact that the hard realities of gross inequality constitute the daily condition of masses of poor and marginalized people in numerous countries. It is they who are the victims not only of our personal greed but also of the effects of our economic and trade policies. In the face of the growing economic divide and the degradation of nature caused by the systemic demand for compulsory growth ("growth imperative"), we acknowledge that the system on which it is built needs to be radically restructured.
- We are grateful for a Reformation history in which the biblical witness was brought to bear not only on the level of personal sinfulness but also on the level of injustice and inequality created by the structures of the economy. We acknowledge Luther's critique of the early profit economy and his collaboration with the political authorities to establish institutions for wealth-sharing (the Common Chest) that brought constructive change to the political economy of Europe. We recall with gratitude the way in which Luther's understanding of scripture led to the creation of community-wide health care for the sick and disabled and provided public education for women and men as well as institutions that provided care and financial security for orphans, widows and the aged. We also are grateful to all international ecumenical church organizations which have formally rejected exploitative trade policies, namely, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) in 2003, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) in 2004, the World Council of Churches (WCC) and Pope Francis for the Vatican in 2013.
- We therefore reject a personal lifestyle that is out of keeping with the demands of our faith. We reject the policies of our government that have not served the masses of poor and marginalized people in the world. We reject the economic and trade policies that serve to guarantee wealth for the few while condemning masses of peoples to poverty.

We commit ourselves

- to doing all within our means to follow in the Reformer's footsteps by creating those structures and practices designed to share the abundance of God's creation with the whole human family. This begins with our personal commitment to adopting a simpler style of life, sharing food and clothing with those in need. But it extends well beyond personal style to establishing, both locally and internationally, the social structures and policies that ensure that everyone has adequate shelter, food, education, access to basic services and the ability to participate in the democratic process.
- 5. *For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God; if it begins with us, what will be the end for those who do not obey the gospel of God? (I Peter 4:17). But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. (II Corinthians 4:7)***
- We affirm that the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, built on the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments, is called to continually renew its life. It is free to change its form for the sake of its mission. The proclamation of the new creation will endure even when all earthly structures have been destroyed and all forms of religion, including the forms of Christianity itself, are gone.
 - We confess that we have frequently tended to absolutize the structures of the church over the message of the church. We have put our ecclesial life ahead of our calling to feed the hungry and bring freedom to those who are oppressed. We have not felt free enough to abandon the structures that have made us comfortable and that have removed us from the pain of the hungry, the poor and the disabled.
 - We are grateful for the Reformation's insistence that the church itself stands under God's judgment and is continually in need of reform. "*Ecclesia reformata sed semper reformanda*" (the church reformed but always to be reformed). Martin Luther called on the church to repent because it was *ecclesia peccatorum*, a church of sinners. The 95 Theses charged that the early profit economy was the institutionalizing of greed and that the church was a partner with the banking industry in perpetuating a works-

based system of greed and exploitation. We acknowledge with gratitude the historic Lutheran Confessions that included a mechanism, *status confessionis* (Formula of Concord, Article X, "Adiaphora"), that calls for the rejection of practices that stand in direct contradiction to the gospel.

- We therefore reject the church's unholy alliance with an economic and political system that continues to exacerbate the increasing divide between the wealthy and the poor. Because the perpetual drive for profit makes so many demands on the natural environment (fossil fuels, carbon emissions, pollution), the world faces a major climate crisis. We reject the misuse of religion to justify any claim to dominion over others and the abuse of the natural world. We reject any ideology that claims a divine call to control capital, dictate the rules of trade and ultimately dominate the world.

We commit ourselves

- to the ongoing reformation of the church. We will seek to provide a space for the open discussion of critical issues, including those that question the fundamental ethical values that undergird our social, economic, and political life.
- to taking seriously the lessons learned from the Confessing Church of Germany, including its public rejection of the racism inherent in the White Christian nationalism of the "Aryan" clause and the expelling of Jews from churches, places of business and offices of government and its overall Nazification of the church. Especially pertinent is the manner in which similar threats are taking place today, including in the United States where democracy is being undercut by forms of White Christian nationalism.
- to calling the ecumenical church, through the instrumentation of the World Council of Churches (WCC), to give serious consideration to the development of a process of confession (*processus confessionis*) with the goal of declaring the present situation to be a time of special confession, a *status confessionis*,^[3] to counter a direct threat to the gospel. Rooted in the Reformation's commitment to safeguard the centrality of the gospel and inspired by the courageous action of the Confessing Church of Germany as expressed in the Barmen

Declaration of 1934, we request the WCC to call on its members to categorically reject the toxic ideological blend of political domination, economic exploitation, and White Christian nationalism.

We cannot be silent.

**“Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless.
Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.”**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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Biblical references are from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVUE).

i The Confessing Church, or Bekennende Kirche, was a German Protestant movement in the 1930s that opposed the "German Christians," a creation of the Nazi regime that sought to make the church an instrument of the state's "national socialist" policy. Key figures like Martin Niemöller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer were part of the movement, which issued the Barmen Declaration in 1934 to assert the church's spiritual autonomy from the state. While initially focused on preserving church freedom, members eventually recognized the Nazis' inherently anti-Christian nature. There were weaknesses also. The Barmen Confession never mentioned the Jews and the Confessing Church only took up the oppression of the Jews very late. There were, if fact, Confessing Church leaders who held antisemitic views even as they were opposing the Nazi regime.

ii The Arab League plan for Gaza of March 4, 2025, endorsed a comprehensive plan drafted by Egypt for the early recovery, reconstruction, and future governance of Gaza. It called for the rebuilding of Gaza without displacing its residents, re-establishing the Palestinian Authority (PA), and pursuing a two-state solution. The plan was for the initiative to span five years with an estimated cost of \$53 billion.

iii Status confessionis is the term that has been historically employed to designate a critical, "make or break" issue for the church. It comes out of the Adiaphoristic controversy (Formula of Concord, Article X) during the Reformation but has since come to be employed at times in history when the very integrity of the church has been challenged, e. g., during the period of the Third Reich in Germany in the 1930s and in opposition to the apartheid in Southern Africa in the late 20th century.