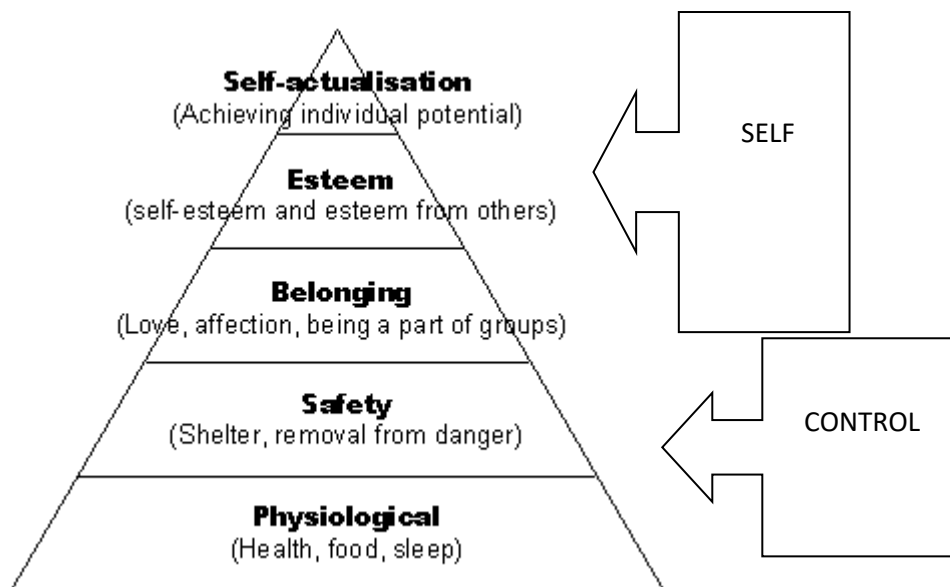


Lutheran Identity in Changing Global and Asia Contexts

(Lutheran World Federation)

Introduction

We are dealing with a very vital question on identity in general and the Asian Lutheran Identity in specific. Identity plays significant role in determining how we understand and experience the world, as well as shaping the types of opportunities and challenges we face. As we can see in the diagram below, the top three aspects cover the self understanding, while the below two aspects cover the area of control.



(What can be clearly seen here is that the upper three levels are about the person and their sense of self. This is in contrast to the bottom two levels, which are about [control](#). (Abraham Maslow defined a hierarchy of needs¹)

The Search for Asian Lutheran Identity

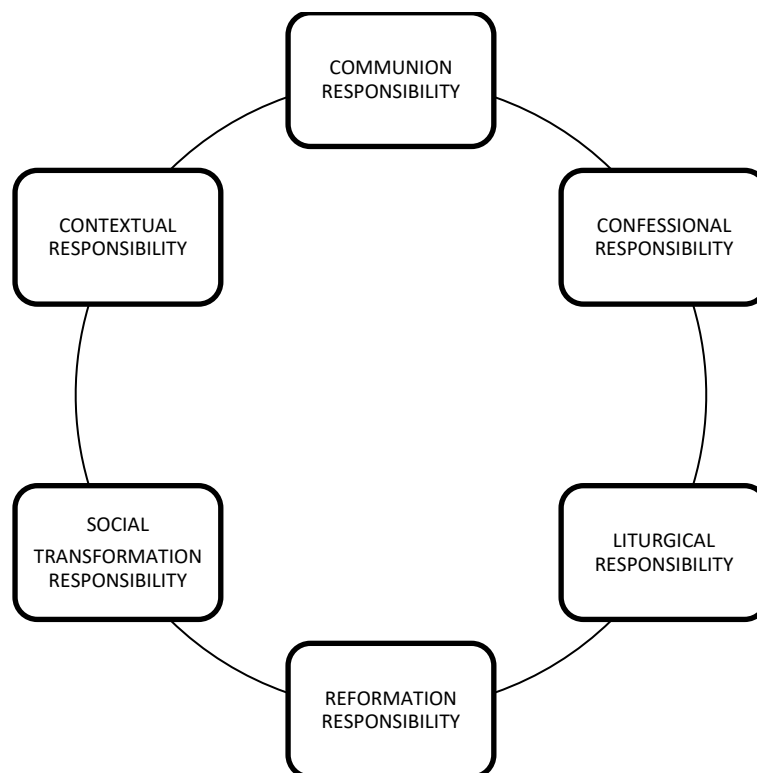
World Lutheran identity has evolved over the centuries, in that it has embraced a flexi model in its journey of becoming a communion of Churches. As Dr Mtata notes, “This Lutheran communion has its basis and unity in the common understanding and proclamation of the Gospel

in Word and Sacrament grounded in the witness of Holy Scripture and guarded and expressed by the Lutheran Confessions to which all Lutheran churches are committed.”² Hence, in this journey, which intends to provide a reinterpretation of the Lutheran identity in the Asian context, is certainly a complex process due to its diversity. It is my opinion that the Asian Lutheran Identity is not static and defies definition; hence could only be described in general terms.

Just as an individual’s identity is a personal matter and there can be many historical, socioeconomic, and sociological factors that can directly or indirectly influence this decision, so is the Asian context. With all its diversity in-terms of people, culture, social-economic orientation, majority religious domination and geographic mass etc, our search of an Asian Lutheran identity needs to have an open attitude in celebrating our differences combined with an ardent seeking for mutuality and cooperation.

In the global context the reinterpretation process has ideologically and theologically given birth to various identity forms validated as Lutheran. These forms have with them a conservative outlook or a moderate outlook or a more liberal outlook. Asian Lutheran Churches, since of early has generally subscribed to a denominational identity rather than a doctrinal identity; but had at the same time given a stronger emphasis to spiritual notions rather than socio-ethical concerns in defining what is it to be a Lutheran Church in Asia. End of the day, what we seek here is for a self understanding, which would help the local Lutheran Communion overcome rigid and narrow interpretations. This is well affirmed in the 1984 Budapest Assembly document where the member Churches had adopted a statement on the “Self-Understanding and Task of the Lutheran World Federation”³

Despite those complexities, in this paper I will endeavour to draw some notions in describing and reinterpreting our Asian Lutheran identity within this changing global Asian context. The discussions here on identity should also need to keep a keen eye on media influences, geopolitics and post-modernism impact to allow a holistic understanding of our reinterpretation. This journey would take us to consider the following 6 areas:



1. COMMUNION RESPONSIBILITY

Jesus prayed for oneness of the Church even as His death was approaching, "That they all may be one..." (Jn. 17: 21). It is obvious that Jesus prayed for something that was attainable by the Church, hence, the aspect of communion ought to be taken seriously. With His death approaching, this communion and unity aspect seems to be the most pressing and urgent task. As a contrast Jesus also illustrated the result of disunity when he said, "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought

to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand" (Matt. 12: 25). God does not require of us something that is impossible to practice and then condemn when we fail (I Cor. 1-3). Similarly, As cited in the LWF document on Self Understanding of Lutheran Communion Study Document - Department for Theology and Public Witness (2015), the communion expression is a vital hallmark of Lutheran ecclesiology since its early days. "This communion with Christ through faith and participation in his saving work implies deep solidarity with one another and intrinsically includes the sharing of material and spiritual resources.

Furthermore, this impels mutual commitment and common life and action. The communion is lived out not [in] a coerced and prescribed uniformity. It realizes itself in a variety of forms. It lives and works through the multiplicity of gifts it receives and the variety of tasks placed before it"⁴ Hence this communion, being a principle and praxis, reflects a dynamic inter-connectedness of communal living by integrating the Christian faith and action, in order to promote peace, hope and love.

As rightly noted in the above mentioned Study Document, it is therefore both a gift received and requires tasks to be performed in order to make the communion real and meaningful. "According to the New Testament, communion/*koinonia* points to the significance of the "communion of saints" as the communion of believers who share Word and sacrament, worship and prayer, and the gifts of God."⁵ As Bishop Dr Wesley Kigasung of ELCPNG, mentioned in his keynote address to the June 4-7 Asian Church Leadership Conference (ACLC), there is an "excitement at the growth of the region's Lutheran churches into "a unified body, as we now like to refer to ourselves as a communion of churches in Asia."⁶ Living as a communion and in communion is hallmark of Asian Lutheran identity.

This communion is not just among the Lutheran, but extends into the ecumenical sphere too. In most parts of Asia, Christianity is a minority faith and at the same time the fact of denominational pluralism is a reality. Hence, enhancing ecumenical unity and Church cooperation is vital. Lutheran Churches in seeking to fulfill the Great Commission and Great Commandment need to transcend denominational boundaries and constantly seek to overcome ecumenical challenges. In Asia some see denominationalism as a legacy of foreign mission agencies in promoting a particular brand name. Learning from past history ecumenism must not just be seen in functional terms but as a dynamic unity ('that they may be one').

2. CONFSSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY – UPHOLDING THE CENTRALITY OF THE WORD

Asian Lutherans Churches subscribe to the belief that the Bible is the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions are accepted as formulation suitable for instilling Christian faith, as they are constructed on the basis of Biblical teachings. Here the importance to accept the Bible as the Word of God needs reiteration. We can note how the phrase "based upon the Word of God" repeatedly appears in the Book of Concord in relation to the rule and norm. The Solid Declaration notes, Luther asserted that "the Word of God is and should remain the sole rule and norm of all doctrine, and that no human being's writings dare be put on a par with it, but that everything must be subjected to it."⁷ The Asian Lutheran identity, I believe, subscribes to this vital affirmation in its hermeneutical responsibility and contextualization. In a world highly influenced by postmodernism, where, the popular inclination is to deem that the Bible is not the Word of God, but contains the Word of God, the

Asian Lutheran identity must come as a prophetic voice calling for reformation.

Our Asian Lutheran identity therefore must continue to be a communion that undergirds the acceptance of the Lutheran Confessions and acceptance of the Bible as the Word of God. Here probably people may raise a question as to what it means “Bible is the Word of God”. The Asian Churches in the process of redefining their Lutheran confessional identity must address that question for purpose of doctrinal clarity. Namely, how does the Bible “function” authoritatively within local Lutheran faith community or church and shape the way it is perceived and taken seriously?

3. CONTEXTUAL RESPONSIBILITY

Asia being uniquely diverse, the Asian Lutheran Church is required to constantly explore and seek new and meaningful ways in relating and interacting with the different religions and cultures. Here, I would like to point out that the Asian Lutheran Churches’ greatest challenge rests in contextualization of the Christian message and creating a positive attitude concerning culture. Contextualization is the process that attempts to read the Scriptures with the context of the recipients in mind and making it understandable, practical and acceptable to the hearers. The Asian Lutheran Church, when it adopts a positive attitude towards culture, it would achieve two successive goals: first, making the Bible and gospel message relevant through inculturation, contextualization and indigenization; and second, developing an attitude of personhood with people who are different to us. Both require that the Asian Lutheran Church take the issue of ‘culture and the gospel’ seriously enough to put its act together, and

prevent uncritical importation and appropriation of Western models and ideologies.

The way Asian Christians understand the gospel and participate in mission must be developed from within Asia by taking into consideration Asian realities; namely, poverty, marginalization, globalization, colonialism, Christian minority, drug abuse, etc. Certainly the call to rethinking Asian identity and Asian approaches does not imply that we merely provide for some form of a cosmetic change to existing Western models in Asia but more so a call to develop indigenous models. Concepts such as in-culturation and indigenization must therefore be carefully inculcated into the Asian Lutheran Church without neglecting the crucial aspects of ecclesiology and mission. The reason why the Asian Lutheran Church seeks to become indigenous is to remain faithful to biblical ecclesiology. Being a Church we share two responsibilities: 'being called out' to worship (1 Pet. 2:5-9) and being 'sent back' into the world to serve as effective witness (Jn. 17:18, 20:21). Concern about syncretism (faith being diluted) and danger of culture undermining the Divine truth cannot be overlooked either. All cultures and cultural practices must be tested and judged by the Scriptures. But such concerns must not dampen or suppress our effort towards in-culturation but guide the process of making faith relevant to the context.

4. LITURGICAL RESPONSIBILITY

Given today's context, where neo-Pentecostalism has impacted most Asian Churches, the process of redefining the Asian Lutheran identity, should rightly engage and revisit the question surrounding the expression "we are a liturgical Church". According the "Apology" the

term “liturgy” fits well with ministry (Apology XXIV:79-81). Hence the Lutheran Church remains a liturgical church, as long as congregational piety is characterized by the proclamation of the Gospel and administration of the Sacraments in an orderly, dignified and Scripturally-guided system. In the contemporary usage, the term liturgy is generally applied in relation to worship services.

To clarify misconceptions surrounding liturgical worship, we shall begin by defining the term ‘liturgy’. The term ‘liturgy or liturgical’ is commonly applied in the context of the traditional Church usage of set service orders, clerical vestment, observance of Church calendar, etc. The term liturgy is derived from the Greek word ‘leitourgia’, implying an act of ministry or service (Phil. 2:30). Since Christian worship carries the notion of servanthood, its application in relation to worship is thus prominent. Probably the next question to daunt an inquisitive mind would be concerning the role of liturgy in worship. How valid and good are the liturgical elements, which are expressly promoted within traditional churches.

In any worship, liturgical or ‘charismatic’, two components are necessary for meaningful worship; first, the availability of appropriate tools or worship aids (songs, music etc.) and second, the attitude of the worshipper (servanthood). Taking a closer look at the Scriptures we could notice that the liturgical practices applied in Jewish worship, were those approved through divine revelations. But what accounted for God’s later resentment for some of the liturgical practices in Judaism is to be found in the people’s careless appropriation of those practices and their wrongful attitude in worship (Mal.3:8-18). Therefore it is not the liturgical practices in isolation that were condemned or denounced as illegitimate but the absence of the required spiritual attitude in worship.

We need to find ways to resolve the liturgical-charismatic divide so as to enhance purposeful communion and ecumenicity. A vital lesson may be derived from the 'Apology' "...we believe that the true unity of the church is not harmed by differences in rites instituted by men, although we like it when universal rites are observed for the sake of tranquility. So in our churches we willingly observe the order of the Mass, the Lord's day, and the other more important feast days. With a very thankful spirit we cherish the useful and ancient ordinances, especially when they contain a discipline that serves to educate and instruct the people and the inexperienced". (Apology VII/VIII:33).

5. REFORMATION RESPONSIBILITY

Reformation Sunday, serves as an important reminder, not only of the Reformation that took place 500 years ago, but as a wake up call for us in Asia. We are reminded that we need to look to Christ and the cross for our forgiveness, life, and salvation – in Paul's words 'boast about Christ'. A call for reformation is a call to return to the true teachings of the Word of God. The Asian Lutheran Church continues to cherish Reformation and seeks to identify itself as an instrument of reformation in proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ, crucified, for the sins of the world to the people in our community, and throughout the world for Jesus' sake. This ought to be done with much prayer and humility. As the prayer below:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy;

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life

6. SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION RESPONSIBILITY

Both at global macro level and Asian micro level, socio-economic and political contexts are experiencing dramatic change and at a rapid pace. There is a constant demand for people to respond to these changes quickly and radically. Those who are unable to respond, due to reasons beyond their scope and means, may eventually become alienated and displaced within their community. Such displacement certainly contributes to various forms of social ill such as: poverty, illiteracy, alcoholism, abuse of a spouse or child, erosion of human rights, unemployment, migration, a rise in urban poverty, violence, HIV/AIDS, a breakdown in family structures, etc. While the Church in general and the Asian Lutheran Church in particular may not be able to prevent this global flux, it could become a bridge between the two sectors of the population impacted the most by it: the developed and the displaced. This Lutheran identity is vital in remaining faithful to the call to be witnesses to the gospel of Christ and practicing the art of being the “salt and light” on earth.

The Asian Lutheran Church is not only apostolic but it is also prophetic. The prophet as God’s and peoples’ spokesperson (as an intercessor) must learn how to speak. Hence, our identity, proclamation and prophetic understanding of the Gospel is demonstrated in the way

we live and care for our neighbors. Our method is Christological – the way Christ lived in solidarity with his people. This goodwill extended to humanity through the gracious disposition of God, ought to be reflected in our Church life through word and action. The Cross of Christ, which represents the supreme form of communication that is, speaking the language of love, remains the benchmark for practice of Christianity in Malaysia.

Further Paul uses the Greek term ‘metamorphosis’ to speak of transformation or renewal of the mind prompted by God in a believer. Such transforming activity by God is purposeful. First, it provides character to the Church and second, it motivates the Church to help transform dire situations, oppressive systems and lives of people in want. In this context the Church could never relinquish its role in nation building and character formation. The poor with their deprivations are always far away (in the margins) from our daily life. But faith must draw us to their neighborhood. Faith need not flee from this allegedly godless world, for it is into this world that God came in Jesus Christ to transform. On the one hand, the Church should not be left behind in terms of development, while on the other, the Church should not leave the suffering and needy behind, uncared for. Hence, we note that social care is an integrated part of Asian Lutheran identity and Christian mission.

Endnotes

¹ <http://changingminds.org/explanations/needs/identity.htm>

² Kenneth Mtata, Basic Elements of Lutheran Identity, Paper Presented at Soechi Hotel, Medan/ Indonesia, 17-21 November 2014, LWF Document, p15.

³ “This Lutheran communion of churches finds its visible expression in pulpit and altar fellowship, in common witness and service, in the joint fulfillment of the missionary task, and in openness to ecumenical cooperation, dialogue and community. The Lutheran churches of the world consider their communion as an expression of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. Thus, they are committed to work for the manifestation of the unity of the church given in Jesus Christ”. Carl H. Mau (ed.), Budapest 1984. “In Christ – Hope for the Word.” Official Proceedings of the Seventh Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation, LWF Report No. 19/20 (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1985), 176.

⁴ *Communio/Koinonia. A New Testament-Early Christian Concept and its Contemporary Appropriation and Significance*, A Study by the Institute for Ecumenical Research, Strasbourg, (1990), p,8.

⁵ Self Understanding of Lutheran Communion Study Document - Department for Theology and Public Witness (2015), p.10.

⁶ Discussion on Identity of LWF Communion Prominent at Asian Regional Conferenc <http://www.lutheranworld.org/News/Welcome.EN.html> KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia/GENEVA, 15 June,2004 (LWI).

⁷ Theodore Tappert, Book of Concord –Part 2, SD, 5:9, Fortress Press, Philadelphia1959, p.505.