



LIBERATED  
BY GOD'S  
GRACE



THE  
LUTHERAN  
WORLD  
FEDERATION

**Bibliographic information published by the German National Library**

The *Deutsche Nationalbibliothek* lists this publication in the *Deutsche Nationalbibliografie*; detailed bibliographic data are available on the internet at <http://dnd.dnd.de>

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Printed in Germany

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This book was printed on FSC-certified paper

Editorial assistance: Department for Theology and Public Witness

Layout: Department for Theology and Public Witness

Design: LWF-Office for Communication Services

Printing and Binding:

Published by Evangelische Verlagsanstalt GmbH, Leipzig, Germany, under the auspices of

The Lutheran World Federation

150, rte de Ferney, PO Box 2100

CH-1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland

Parallel editions in German and Spanish

# CONTENTS

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Preface.....   | 7   |
| <i>Martin Junge</i>  |     |
| Introduction.....  | 9   |
| <i>Anne Burghardt</i>  |     |
| Liberated by God’s Grace—From What, To What?.....  | 15  |
| <i>Gottfried Brakemeier</i>  |     |
| The Church and the Public Space. A Lutheran Interpretation.....                                  | 29  |
| <i>Kjell Nordstokke</i>  |     |
| The Liberating Word of God. Reflections on the Lutheran Understanding of Holy<br>Scripture ..... | 43  |
| <i>Hans-Peter Grosshans</i>  |     |
| Implementing Gender Justice: An Asian Perspective.....   | 59  |
| <i>Au Sze Ngui</i>   |     |
| Education and the Reformation.....   | 69  |
| <i>Elżbieta Byrtek</i>   |     |
| Freed by God’s Love to Change the World: A Youth Perspective.....                                | 79  |
| <i>Monica M. Villarreal</i>  |     |
| Liberated by God’s Grace: Grace and Peace. An Anglican Perspective.....                          | 85  |
| <i>Timothy J. Harris</i>   |     |
| Bible Study: Isaiah 55:1-2.....  | 97  |
| <i>Zephania Kameeta</i>  |     |
| List of Contributors .....   | 105 |

# FREED BY GOD'S LOVE TO CHANGE THE WORLD: A YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

*Monica M. Villarreal*

## **YOUTH ARE LEADERS: YOUTH ARE CHURCH**

I have served as an ordained pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) for over three years. My youthfulness shocks many when I answer the church door and greet people as the pastor. I have entered hospital rooms for visitation, only to be greeted by people exclaiming, “Are you old enough to be a pastor?” And as a woman serving in a community where few women are clergy the shock is twofold. But, I have to admit, as a young female pastor, challenging people’s stereotypes of what or who a pastor looks like is one of my joys of faith.

In an aging church, I will be a “young” church leader for another twenty years. Sometimes it is difficult and tiresome feeling the constant need to justify my position as a church leader. As I talk with other young pastors many feel the same way. The same is true for many young people who do not feel called into professional church leadership but desire a voice and place in congregations to serve and make a difference in their community and world. Youth are not always given the support, encouragement, or invitation to lead the church. And sometimes youth are given the opportunity to lead as long as what is said and done is exactly what has been said and done for the last several years. The church will be in a grave leadership crisis if youth are viewed as a category of church. We are church together—young and old.

I have been asked many times why I became a pastor in the church. In North America, mainline Protestant denominations are experiencing a decline in membership and the church does not hold the same power or place in society as it did years ago. It seems like a fading and insecure profession to enter.

I did not grow up in the church like many others who enter the professional church leadership. I was baptized at the age of six alongside my mother who was baptized as an adult. I do not come from a particularly religious or church-going family and I did not often attend Sunday School (faith classes) as a youngster. As a teenager, faith and church made most sense when what was said in worship or Bible class was lived out in the world. For me, helping to build a house for a homeless family helped make sense of faith. Attending youth gatherings or Bible camp offered the opportunity to be a part of intentional Christian community that felt more authentic and real. Having space to ask questions about life and faith taught me that faith is not easy. Faith includes doubt. And I learned that questions are okay. The disciples asked Jesus many questions.

I became a pastor because during all of the really hard times in my life the church was a safe haven for me. Worship gave me a sense of peace and encouragement. The youth group offered opportunities for me to learn, to grow in faith and eventually have a leadership role teaching Bible/faith classes to other youth. The church accepted me, just as I am—a child of God. Through the church I came to know the love of God and my calling to proclaim the love of God in Christ Jesus that transcends all of the world's brokenness.

## **FREED BY GOD'S LOVE**

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.<sup>1</sup>

In “The Freedom of a Christian,” Martin Luther emphasizes the power of faith as believing in God's promise of a new life. When we believe in God's saving grace as a gift freely given and an expression of God's love then we are freed from the worry about our place before God or about being a “good enough” person to be loved by God. When Christ died on the cross for the injustice, violence and sins of the world he said to his followers, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (Jn 12:32).

Contrary to popular cultural values of Americans in the USA, the freedom that Luther speaks of is not freedom to do and say whatever one wants to, or to buy and sell just anything. Luther is not speaking about freedom of religion or freedom of speech or the many other “freedoms” that are the mantras of our culture today. Rather, Luther connects faith and freedom. Faith and freedom are relational. Without faith we cannot know the freedom

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian, 1520” in Harold J. Grimm, Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther's Works*, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 344.

that we have in Christ. And because we have freedom in Christ, our faith in God’s saving grace, which was poured out upon the whole world, Jews and Gentiles alike, we are drawn to share this love with others. Freed by God’s love we are inescapably bound to one another in Christian community both near and far. We are both “freed from” and “freed for.”

## **FREED FROM—FREED TO**

The Global Young Reformers Network<sup>2</sup> invites youth to think more deeply about what it means to be Lutheran and what it means to be Christian. Connecting through video chat, youth are encouraged to join the Young Reformers by sharing a personal story of being “Freed from” and “Freed to.” For example:

**Freed from: Perfection**—Children and teenagers in Singapore are expected to meet high standards in the pursuit of excellence. As a young person, I struggled with various issues of fear and self-worth. The breakthrough came when the Lord spoke to me through Psalm 139, where the psalmist spoke of how God created his inmost being, and knit him together in his mother’s womb. Knowing that God valued me and had a plan for me even at conception, I knew I had no reason to fear. As the psalmist writes, I praise God because “I am fearfully and wonderfully made”!

**Freed to: Service**—Knowing the grace that is in Christ Jesus, I now share that message of hope and redemption with people so that we might all come to treasure the precious gifts and talents that God has given. I actively serve in my church’s youth ministry as well as other ministries. One verse that I keep in mind at all times is the Apostle Paul’s exhortation in 1 Corinthians 10:31, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.”

Lee “Darius” Zhen Ying (Lutheran Church in Singapore, for Asia)

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<sup>2</sup> The Global Young Reformers Network is a program of the Lutheran World Federation, created by youth, for youth. Utilizing social media we seek to create a global network of youth to build relationships and dialogue among communion churches about what it means to be Lutheran and Christian in a religiously pluralistic context. We desire to give voice to young people as leaders in their churches and in the world. We are not forming a new Lutheran church, rather we aim to strengthen existing youth ministries across the communion and accompany churches in creating new youth ministries through the work of the LWF Youth Desk. In observance of the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation the Global Young Reformer’s theme is “Freed by God’s Love to Change the World.” Creating a network of young reformers all over the world, we want to show what this means: *ecclesia semper reformanda*—a church in ongoing reformation.

**Freed from: Immovable pews**—When I first walked into the church that I now attend every Sunday I was surprised by the way in which the worship space was arranged. The altar is at the center and all the pews were moved so that they form a circle. What I experienced there, and I still experience every Sunday, is a shared, communal liturgy in which everyone can experience the gospel. We all have active roles during the service: saying the prayer of the day, playing musical instruments or reading the gospel. Being able to worship in the round creates an awareness of each other's presence and also places us at the same level. We are equal; there is no hierarchy in a circle.

**Freed to: Creating new space**—As Lutherans we believe that while traditions are not necessary for salvation, they are sometimes good for order, tranquility and common practice. But when they do not serve their purpose, when people are uncomfortable and the church is no longer inviting and God's message does not reach everyone, then we may need to consider reorganizing the pews.

Carolina Huth (United Evangelical Lutheran Church, Argentina, for Latin America and the Caribbean)

**Freed from: Church walls**—"[T]hose who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen" (1 Jn 4:20).

Who is your neighbor? Your brother and sister? Too often church buildings become a place of walls. There are those who are "in" and those who are "out." Our identity and belonging can easily be assigned to what church we attend. The early church wrestled with belonging. Some argued, "I belong to Apollos" or "I belong to Paul" (1 Cor 1:12). We all belong to Christ. I have been freed from church walls to see the face of Christ in the unexpected. I have been freed from church walls to discover that God is at work in the community all around me. I have been freed from church walls to join in God's work.

**Freed to: Rebuilding community**—Although I live in the USA, the streets are not made of gold and I have yet to discover the land of milk and honey. Where I live and serve as a pastor, God calls us to rise up for justice, restore hope, and rebuild community. Significant poverty, unemployment, lack of transportation, vacant homes and violence shape people's daily lives. Empowered by the Holy Spirit and vision of Isaiah 58:6-12, I have been freed by the love of Christ for the purpose of rebuilding community.

Rev. Monica Villarreal (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, for North America)

Many other stories are available at, <http://youngreformers.lutheranworld.org/updates>

## **FREED TO CHANGE THE WORLD**

God’s love is power for transformation. In the waters of holy baptism we are transformed by God’s love, claimed as children of God, gathered around God’s Word and sent for the sake of the world. Having faith to believe in God’s promise of new life the Holy Spirit empowers us to create new ways of being the church (the body of Christ) together. Our faithful response to God’s love cannot settle for the status quo which so often supports ways of injustice and oppression. The gospel proclaimed must compel people of faith actively to engage in the redeeming work of Christ who is already at work in the world.

Martin Luther never intended to create a new church or to change the world. He had hoped the church leadership would heed the message of faith and freedom and be compelled to have mercy on the poor and oppressed. Luther sought to realign the church with the teachings of Scripture to address abuses of power and leadership. The Protestant Reformation became a religious and social movement that took on various perspectives and contexts throughout Europe in the years during and after Luther.

It is always good to examine our personal faith, communal faith and the faith of the whole church. Our first disposition toward God is confession that we have fallen short of the glory of God and are in need of forgiveness. The continued division among people, communities, religious groups and even among Christians is cause enough for self-reflection.

Youth at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, were asked what they hoped would be changed in our world in the next five years? Many expressed concern for public health care pertaining to the current national debate. Many expressed a desire for greater gender equality and less discrimination of people. Students would like to see more sustainable and renewable energy options in the future, and there was a deep desire for more peaceable relationships between peoples and countries. Sharing and proclaiming the love of Christ was identified as being vital for changing the world and church.

Grounded in Scripture and in the tradition of the Reformation we live according to the principle *ecclesia semper reformanda*—a church in ongoing reformation. Reformation is not our work but God’s creative work of renewal.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him (Jn 3:16-17).

God’s love transforms.



Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age (Mt 28:19-20).

In Christ, we have been freed by God's love to change the world.

## **QUESTIONS**

*What have you been freed from and what are you freed for?*

*What change in the world do you wish to see? How can you as a person of faith help make that change?*

*What does being Lutheran mean to you?*