LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

Sometimes wars bring people together. It’s true for Lutherans.

One hundred years ago now much of the world was involved in World War I, including many Lutherans. Most were from Germany and some from the United States. That means they were on opposite sides. Some must have been aware that they were fighting fellow Lutherans; perhaps they even asked “Why?”

Partly in answer to that question, 147 delegates representing Lutheran church bodies from 22 nations around the world met in Eisenach, Germany, in 1923, and established the Lutheran World Convention. By coincidence it was almost exactly 400 years since Luther had hidden out in Eisenach’s Wartburg Castle because of death threats (1521-22). While there Luther translated the *New Testament* from Greek into German (within 11 weeks!) Eisenach gained additional fame later as the birthplace of Lutheranism’s greatest composer, Johann Sebastian Bach (1685).

Issues of concern to the delegates included continuing efforts at relief in the war-torn countries, concern for refugees, support for global mission efforts which had been interrupted, support for sound Christian education and theological clarity in the face of developing threats from communism and German nationalism.

The 20-year interlude between the two world wars saw successive meetings of the Lutheran World Convention—Copenhagen in 1929 and Paris in 1935. By then there were threatening indications of developing Nazism. The outbreak of World War II in 1939 caused a planned 1940 meeting in Philadelphia to be scratched.

Following the war, the need for stronger cooperation led to a meeting in Lund, Sweden, in 1947 where the Lutheran World Federation became the successor to the LWC. The LWF increased assistance with refugees and displaced persons, and material aid for recovery and rebuilding projects. Additional efforts were directed toward helping Lutheran mission entities around the world become independent and self-supporting.

In its founding documents the Lutheran World Federation identified Four Pillars which would give its work a firmer foundation than the LWC afforded: 1. common initiatives in mission; 2. rescue for the needy; 3. joint efforts in theology; and 4. a common response to the ecumenical challenge/opportunity. An additional change: the work of the LWC had been done primarily by individuals. The LWF was established as a federation of churches and was more globally oriented.

It wasn’t just Lutherans who realized the need for stronger cooperation following the devastation of WWII. Other denominational groups formed closer bonds, and these groups expanded their work with other church bodies, forming in 1948 the World Council of Churches, a cooperative effort of most of the Protestant church bodies in the world.

Geneva had developed into an international city in the politically neutral nation of Switzerland, so it seemed an appropriate location for the headquarters of the WCC, the LWF and several other denominational organizations, several on the same campus.

By the time the second LWF Assembly took place in Hannover, Germany, in 1952, 90% of all Lutheran church bodies in the world had signed up with the LWF. Most of the remaining 10% are churches and missions affiliated with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

In 2017 the Lutheran World Federation member churches will have been working together for 70 years. Huge changes have happened in that time. The number of member churches has grown to 144 in 79 countries. Even though the dominant number of Lutherans are still in Europe, primarily Germany and the Scandinavian countries, four of the 12 largest Lutheran Church bodies are located in the Global South: in Africa: Ethiopia, Tanzania and Madagascar; and Sumatra in Indonesia.

The Federation continues to hold Assemblies about every 5-7 years. These 12 gatherings have taken place in Europe, Africa, Asia and both North and South America. In the 500th Luther Anniversary year of 2017 the Assembly will be hosted by Namibia, an African country which is majority Lutheran.

Luther’s Reformation could not have taken place without the world-changing invention of printing by moveable type. But in his wildest dream, Luther could not have imagined a global communion of Lutheran Christians who, through the LWF web site, can be in instantaneous communication with the life and work of 72,000,000 fellow Lutheran Christians around the globe! Google Lutheran World Federation to connect with your fellow Lutherans.

Paul K. Hanson, April 2016