



# Living in an ecumenical world

## **Preamble**

The 23<sup>rd</sup> European Lutheran Conference met 22<sup>nd</sup> – 24<sup>th</sup> May 2014 in Bleckmar – Bergen, Germany, under the theme 'Living in an ecumenical world'. We discovered a topic so vast that we felt that we only 'skimmed the surface' of many deep and weighty issues and we share our reflections in the hope that (a) you recognise the issues we discussed, and (b) you reflect on and discuss these issues in your congregations so that together we may live as God's people in a world filled with God's people and those who are not God's people (but we hope and pray one day will be).

Our world is an ecumenical one as God has given his church – placed his people – throughout it. As Lutherans we recognise this in the use of the ecumenical creeds and see our Lutheran Confessions – particularly the Augsburg Confession – as a testament to this truth. We also note the existence of the ecumenical movement of the past hundred years which has sought to minimise the fractures and divisions in the church as it works towards a visible unity. Nevertheless the church continues to fracture.

## **1. The Church in an ecumenical world**

Irrespective of the descriptions we use to describe the world, there is one holy, Christian and apostolic church in it. The Christian church is an article of faith – a creation of the Holy Spirit by whose power people are drawn to and united with the risen Lord Jesus. He is the Head of the body which are his people who exist across time and geography. We do not see the risen Lord Jesus since his ascension, nor do we see the Holy Spirit, thus we look for the marks of the church so we know where Jesus meets us and where we can invite others to meet him.

Lutherans have traditionally said that wherever you have God's Word rightly proclaimed and where you have the sacraments administered as Jesus wanted them to be, there he is present and among the people gathered around him is the church. Our conference considered Martin Luther's 1539 treatise 'On the Councils and the Church' and noted the following marks that Christians have: 1. The Word of God; 2. Baptism; 3. The Sacrament of the Altar; 4. The Office of the Keys; 5. The Office of the Ministry; 6. Prayer (particularly in terms of prayer, praise, and thanksgiving in worship); and 7. Cross bearing (Anfechtung). Where these marks are found then people can be sure that they have found the church. This perspective helps us to keep in focus that at its essence the word 'church' refers to the holy people of God who trust that Jesus is the clear revelation of God concerning God as Trinity, humanity as dead in sin, and Jesus as our only Rescuer or Saviour.

As we reflected on these marks of the Church, we recognised that cross bearing has a personal or individual dimension. The disciples of Jesus bear their cross when burdened by sin and death. We also were aware that there is a communal or ecclesial dimension to cross bearing and that our experiences can be distinctly different. For some of us, the experience of tentatio (suffering) because of the world is increasing. We are challenged by the question: 'Do we bear the cross when burdened by the world?'. We are comforted that God never abandons his people.

## **2. Church bodies in an ecumenical world**

The Christian Church today is overtly fractured. Nevertheless its unity still exists. This unity can be hidden behind differences such as language, architecture, dress, music and liturgical forms, and the response of Christian love and this is not problematic when the confession of faith is the same. However where there are confessions of faith that are different – when the teachings about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit and their work and our responses differ, oppose, and even contradict each other, then we attack and mar this unity. Almost 2,000 years of church history reflects the tensions we have produced with the plethora of church bodies all claiming to proclaim the truth of God's Word. Around the world many denominations have split and even those claiming the same confessional position can be in different groups. Noting our own church histories and our minority status in our countries, we are very conscious of the fracturing of the Church and are saddened by it.

Church bodies need to clearly articulate and teach their confession about Jesus. Thus it may be necessary to walk a lonely way in faithfulness to Christ. Only when grounded in God's Word, confident about one's confession of Christ, speaking the truth in love, are we able to address the issues that divide us. We noted that some of the ELC church bodies present were involved in ecumenical groups in their countries where they sought to listen and learn while clearly articulating their confession.

In an increasingly dismissive and hostile world where the church is losing any favoured or privileged position in society, church bodies need to read society accurately, not cling to former advantages, confidently proclaim God's Law and Gospel to the world, and seek to serve the world in love.

## **3. Congregations in an ecumenical world**

What has been said for church bodies can largely be said for congregations for they are church bodies in specific locations. However where church bodies usually speak in terms of teachings, public doctrines, mediating pious opinions and matters of adiaphora, it is in the congregations that the tension of public church teaching and pastoral care for individuals is clearly felt. This is not new. Pastors and congregations and church bodies have always recognised that the exercising of pastoral care is not enshrined in rules and regulations but in the personal application of Law and Gospel. We recognise the tensions that can exist within a congregation and a church body and, it seems, more so now as the 21<sup>st</sup> century is characterised by speed (particularly of communication), people's mobility, limitless access to knowledge and opinion (often undifferentiated) at a time of increasing personal autonomy and the breakdown or changing of past social traditions.

As the world increasingly becomes complex, strange, and even antagonistic so it is easy for congregations to become places to shelter or refuge. This is important and good but it is not the whole story of a congregation for from a congregation, members are sent out into the world to live as disciples. Should our members move away from our congregations then there is now another missionary in the world working to establish a new congregation!

The single issue that dominated our discussion was attendance at Holy Communion of those not of our congregation. It is a sensitive issue among us. We affirmed that congregations need to be confident about their teaching and practice of Holy Communion, articulate and present this teaching and practice clearly to all who attend our services, and leave individual decisions to the pastor. It is important more and more in this century that congregations also clearly teach their adult members the Bible and a return to the Catechism.

#### **4. Christians in an ecumenical world**

As is always the case, Christians in their daily lives encounter personally – often by themselves – both Christians and non Christians. The world environments of these encounters vary greatly. They can be friendly, indifferent, hostile, and much more as the philosophies of the day paradoxically proclaim tolerance of truths (while being intolerant of the truth); a removal of guilt and shame and personal autonomy (which produces ennui and a search for meaning); and the importance of experience (which is unsustainable as an ethic). The ecumenical environment of these encounters varies depending on the country and whether it has a state church. Often the ecumenical environment encountered on an individual level is that confessional distinctives are not important.

Our discussion highlighted that the emotional response most experienced here as Christians engaged the world was fear. There was fear in relation to being uncertain of the faith and how to share, discuss and defend it. This was especially heightened for individual Christians when the world was indifferent or belligerent or when other churches were hostile.

Thus Christians need to be better equipped with knowledge and skills to defend the faith. Such apologetics is more than just knowing what one believes but also knowing God's Word so that one can refute error (2 Timothy 3:16; Titus 1:9) while always speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). God's Word doesn't change. Human nature and our life cycle doesn't change. Nevertheless much of our environment – our society and attitudes – are changing and Christians need to be able to 'read the times' in the light of Scripture so as to be better able to follow Jesus and speak of the hope we have in him in ways that people will hear (1 Peter 3:15).

#### **Conclusion**

We live at the time God has placed us. His church is one. We also live as pilgrims in a fractured church where the confession of God's Word is significantly different and at a time when our society increasingly marginalises us. Our understanding of Church means that we will be scrupulous about the truth of God's Word (what it says and doesn't say) and aware of our own history as a church bodies. Confident of our confession we are confident in our mission – not arrogantly but always in love – and eager to maintain the unity in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3).

To God be the glory!

Adopted in Beckmar – Bergen, 24<sup>th</sup> May, 2014

#### **The Delegates of the Member Churches:**

Belgium	ELKB	Mrs Veronica VAN HATTEM, Pres. Gijsbertus VAN HATTEM
Denmark	ELFKiDk	Mr Svend-Erik HAAHR, Pres. Leif G. JENSEN
France	EEL-SF	Mr Grégory FLAUSS, Rev. Jean Thiébaud HAESSIG (ELC Pres), Rev. Philippe VOLFF
Germany	SELK	Mrs Gerlinde PAHLEN, Rev. Klaus PAHLEN (ELC Vice Pres), Mrs Gertraud PETERSEN, Prof. Dr Johannes PETERSEN, Bish. Hans-Jörg VOIGT, Rev. Roger ZIEGER
Portugal	IELP	Pres. Adalberto HILLER
United Kingdom	ELCE	Chairman Jon EHLERS, Rev. George SAMIEC (ELC Sec), Mrs Dorothea SUTHERLAND

#### **The Delegates of the Guest Churches:**

Finland	FMD	Bish. Risto SORAMIES
Kyrgyz Republic	LCK	Bish. Kenjebek BOTOBAEV
Siberia	SELK	Rev. Alexey STRELTSOV
Spain	IELE	Pes. Gustavo LAVIA
Sweden	MPS	Bish. Roland GUSTAFSSON
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