

REPORT TO NELCSA SYNOD 2025

On the Co-worker Training Programme

The co-worker training programme of NELCSA exists for the purpose of training our lay preachers and other co-workers on various topics and practical ministry skills. A formalised, but somewhat rudimentary structure and syllabus exists for lay preachers in training, which is augmented by additional modules on other ministry areas, and advanced topics for further training of already appointed Lay Preachers. Participants may take part in any module they choose, on any occasion it is offered. Once they have completed all compulsory modules, they may, with the approval of their congregational council, apply for assessment as a lay preacher, whereafter their congregational council may apply to church council to appoint them for a period of four years, which is renewable as many times as all parties agree. Once appointed, it is expected of active Lay Preachers to attend one course per year for continuous development.

For candidates who come from other churches where they have already been Lay Preachers, we have adopted the principle of “RPL” (recognition of prior learning). Each candidate’s prior learning is assessed on its own merits and compared with our own training. Where there are areas of training lacking which are particularly important to us, they will be asked to complete those modules before assessment.

One challenge which we have become aware of, is that in a number of congregations, there are active lay preachers who were appointed long before the 4 year terms were introduced, who were appointed without a specific “time limit”, and with no expectation of continuous training. A number of them have been serving for many years, in many cases with only the local congregation being aware of their service. We want to acknowledge their commitment and service, while at the same time ensuring that the principles which have been decided more recently are consistently applied as much as possible. We therefore have encouraged and invited all these long-serving lay-preachers to attend continuous training as much as possible, which most have taken up in a positive spirit.

Training courses take place regularly in the Southern Region (Southern and Eastern Circuit), and in the Northern Region (Central and Northern Circuit), and are, for the most part very well attended. In general, there are six main training events per year: a) An in-person event in each region in the first quarter (in the Southern Region this is a whole weekend), b) A NELCSA wide online event in the second quarter, c) Another in-person event in each region in the third quarter, d) Another online event in the fourth quarter. Each training event offers a number of modules. In addition to these, additional ad-hoc courses are offered in specific locations to address specific urgent needs, for example training for Holy Communion in a congregation where the pastor’s post is vacant for a longer time, or where a congregation has embarked on a process of moving toward lay leadership. We endeavour to offer each compulsory module at least once in a two year cycle, either online or in each of the regions in an in-person training event.

New modules are being developed as the need arises. At the moment we are creating a syllabus around the connected topics of Funerals and counselling related to death in the family. Other topics that will be tackled in due course are Baptisms and Weddings.

In 2024 we had a Lay Preachers Convention in each region for all those who are already formally appointed as lay preachers, led by Bishop Theo Jäckel. This was well attended and well received by the Lay Preachers. We realised once again how important such gatherings are for those in this important ministry, and endeavour to hold these meetings once every two years, always in the year in which there is no Synod.

Until April 2025, Pastor Dr. Detlev Tönsing has been the NELCSA co-worker training co-ordinator, supported by Pastors Jack Magoro in the Central Circuit, Martin Büttner in the Southern Circuit, and after Pastor Rüdiger Lutz' retirement, Pastor Randolph Kassier in the Eastern Circuit. Effective from the 1st of May 2025, Pastor Tönsing has, in anticipation of his imminent retirement at the end of the year, requested to be relieved of this duty. Church Council, has asked me (Martin Büttner) to take over his role for the time being.

Limitations and concerns: While we are confident that the training that we offer is valuable and of a good standard, we are acutely aware that it is rather limited, as we only have limited capacity to offer the courses. The co-ordinators in the different circuits already do more than can be reasonably expected of them when considering that this is just an additional task for them, alongside many other congregational and church-wide duties. Writing more detailed standardised syllabus outlines for individual modules has been on our "to-do list" for a while, with little progress due to lack of time. We are also concerned that existing modules are not being offered often enough: If a lay preacher in training is unable to attend on a particular occasion, they have to potentially wait a full two years until it is offered again. Finding presenters for specific training modules amongst the other pastors is also a challenge as they also have many other duties, and the number of pastors has declined over the years.

Much more should be, and could be done, but we are at our capacity limit. Especially with the number of vacancies amongst the pastors' posts, and the number of congregations going "lay-led", the need is likely to increase even more. Especially in the area of "coaching" candidates before their assessment, the development of lay-led congregations pose a particular challenge and need: In larger congregations with a full-time pastor, the Pastor is asked to handle the coaching. In a lay-led congregation there is no pastor, and therefore this need must be served in a different manner. The motion tabled by Church Council to create more dedicated capacity for co-worker training going forward will go a long way toward addressing this problem.

Collaboration with the partner churches and organisations: One positive development that I can report on, is the growing collaborative partnerships around the topic of Lay Preachers which have developed in the last 6-8 months. The partners in the conversation are: The Cape Church, the ELM, and the Regional Church of Hannover in Germany. At this stage, it is still very informal, and is primarily a regular exchange of ideas and sharing of resources via online conversation. It is clear, however, that the partnership with the Cape Church could become much more concrete and structured if we wished to pursue this further. The context and the training needs of their lay preachers and co-workers is quite similar to ours, and since we already share the pastors' training with them via UELCSA, it makes sense to pursue closer co-operation in the area of co-worker training too. One concrete project that we trust will come to fruition is a Lay Leadership conference hosted and mostly funded by the ELM which is planned for April 2026 in Gauteng with their partner churches in South Africa. NELCSA will have the opportunity to send four delegates to this conference, and I have been asked to be on the planning committee.

In short, the co-worker training has been very active, but could and should become even more active and expanded to actively address current and future needs of our church.



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