

A WORD OF HOPE IN THE PRESENT SITUATION IN SOUTH AFRICA
BY THE COUNCIL OF THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH
IN SOUTHERN AFRICA (NATAL-TRANSVAAL)

We share the fate of all in this country, even if we, as a predominantly German-speaking church, constitute only a small excerpt of South African society as a whole. For us as Lutherans, the sharing of the common fate of this country means that we belong to the communion of sinners.

We share

- in the injustice, which occurs in numerous ways in our country,
- in the suffering caused thereby,
- in the deficient or even disrupted communication,
- in the fears, the frustrations and concerns regarding the future,
- in the indifference and superficiality which forgets the responsibility for the fellow man,
- in the despair and helplessness in the present situation.

We are reached by

- questions from our congregations, particularly younger people seeking orientation,
- questions from our sister churches in the country, as to where we stand with respect to them,
- questions from our partner churches, here and abroad, regarding our evaluation of the situation and our position.

We observe

- the attitudes of various churches, church-groups, and theologians, as well as politicising secular religions.
- the actions and statements of those responsible in politics, economy and society.

In this situation we feel challenged to express a word of hope.

We venture to make this statement, because, while sharing the common fate of all in this country, as belonging to the communion of sinners, we also believe in the communion of pardoned sinners.

Christ, who reconciled us with God, gives us new hope daily, particularly when we, perplexed and despairing want to relinquish all hope. His love knows of compelling ways for all of us.

For this reason we would like to regard the numerous problems and the crisis of this country as a challenge, to reply to our Lord's love.

1. THE SITUATION:

1.1 The tensions and conflicts between first and third worlds are present in South Africa as in one and the same country, and thus more acute.

1.1.1 Political problems

for example:

- far-reaching political powerlessness of the majority of the population,
- suffering caused by opposing power interests and ideologies from the first world.

1.1.2 Economic problems

for example:

- unequal opportunities,
- unequal pay for equal work,
- deficient infrastructure,
- energy and water shortages,
- subsistence economy and overgrazing,
- threat of starvation;
- while, at the same time, a privileged minority seeks to justify its affluence and luxury.

1.1.3 Social problems

for example:

- population explosion,
- deficient education,
- large-scale unemployment,
- difficulties in communication because of the multiplicity of languages,
- tensions between a stratum of Westernised intellectuals and those rooted in tribal traditions.

1.2 This situation is further aggravated by the fact that the ruling stratum of the population is involved in the painful transition from an agrarian to an industrial society, as is the black population, only that this transition is significantly more painful in the case of the latter.

1.3 The crisis in South Africa is made more acute by the political system. The segregation of the spheres of life of the different race groups has led to almost total alienation, as though the "black" residential area bordering on the "white" residential area, were as far removed as say, Germany from Chad.

1.4 State laws, as well as ideologies and the misuse of power, but also our own selfishness, still support a forced segregation of races ("Apartheid"). In many ways the justification of political, economic and social discrimination continues unabated, even though the fact that reforms have been introduced and further reforms have been announced, is to be welcomed.

1.5 Fears and illusions lead partly to intransigence and partly to aggressions:

Fears

- of the "black" majority and of "black" rule,
- of "white" paternalism and of "white" know-how,
- of loss of affluence and power,
- or of desperate poverty and powerlessness.

Illusions

- of a "white" South Africa,
- of a "black" South Africa,
- of freedom without obligations and power without responsibility.

1.6 Emotions, instead of reason, determine thought and action more and more. Violence and counter-violence are escalating. The number of atrocities, down to the extent of indiscriminate destruction of human lives, is increasing and will be burdening social life for generations.

1.7 In this situation, governed by growing hatred and despair, some churches, church groups and theologians, but also representatives of secular religions (such as communism, ultra-nationalism, progressivism), play an often pitiful role.

One of Luther's parables, in expanded form, can serve to illustrate the situation:

It would seem as though a large number of intoxicated coachmen were raging through towns and country with their coaches. At their sides are the representatives of the religions, spurring the intoxicated coachmen on, because they, themselves, lack

sobriety.

Nobody seems able to take the reins from the intoxicated coachmen, to sober them and bring them to reason.

Some unworldly "believers" and some of the ignorant make way in alarm, demanding to know, what on earth is going on and why the people are drunk.

In such a situation, where emotions and illusions predominate to such a great extent, the fearful question can arise:

Will this country become a huge cemetery, where the epitaphs on the gravestones read, "We were right all along", "God was on our side", "We had no idea" or "We meant well"? A dreadful scene to picture.

- 1.8 We do not want to close our eyes to the frightening reality, and the fearful questions, of what may lie ahead, because we trust, that Christ is the Lord of all future. Because we testify that he is also Lord of the future of this country and its people, we want to devote our services to him, daily anew, in spite of everything.

2. OUR STAND POINT

- 2.1 As white Lutherans we have to confess:

We have failed our fellowmen, particularly those of other colours, in many ways, through indifference, through remaining silent, through lack of love, and awkwardness.

We frequently evaded the question of the political responsibility of the church, or often didn't pose it.

- 2.2 Our Synod in 1985 declared:

God's claim to dominion over the world, which Jesus proclaims, is valid for all spheres of life. The political sphere cannot be excluded. According to Luther's doctrine of the two kingdoms, the church owes the state the preaching of the divine law.

In doing this the church appeals to:

- a) the conscience, reason and expertise of all, who confess to be Christians,
- b) the reason and expertise of all, who do not confess to be Christians,
- c) in particular the church warns the state against subscribing exclusively to any particular ideology, and making a substitute religion of itself.

The church must realise this in teaching and life, because the church is obliged, in the obedience of faith, before God, to testify to this faith through love on earth. This is the calling of the church, with all its members and office bearers.

The church does not want to relieve the politician of his tasks and responsibilities. Instead, it wants to cast light on these from a Christian point of view and to draw the politician's attention to those tasks and responsibilities.

For the sake of love, the preaching of the church cannot halt when it comes to political structures.

They, also, must be examined critically:

"Do the political structures comply with the requirements of justice, which a God-bound conscience demands?"

"Is it sensible to have these particular structures?"

"Are these structures still just?"

"Does the state virtually elevate itself into a substitute religion through certain structures?"

As in all other spheres of life, so, also, in the political sphere, we can only confess before God:

Lord have mercy on me, a sinner!
and through God's forgiveness, confidently and gladly realise a new obedience
in faith.

3. APPEAL TO THOSE RESPONSIBLE IN STATE AND SOCIETY

To all those responsible in politics, economy and society we direct the urgent appeal to take to heart the following thoughts and questions.

3.1 It is the duty of the state, to create order, to bring about peace, and to maintain both. A prerequisite for peace, according to Holy Scripture is the creation and maintenance of justice.

3.2 For this reason we appeal to the conscience of all who bear responsibility in politics, economy and society and who confess to be Christians, whose conscience is therefore bound by the word of God.

Given that all men are created in the image of God, and given the commandments to love one's neighbour and to love the enemy, it follows that justice is required also in the structures of society. That is why the process, whereby state laws, economic and social structures and practices, which conflict with this justice, are changed or abolished, must continue. We think especially of those laws and structures which enforce and support racial segregation and, for reasons of race, deprive the majority of the population of political co-responsibility.

3.3 We appeal to the reason and expertise of all politicians, also those who do not confess to be Christians

(We cannot appeal to the conscience of Non-Christians because it is not bound by the word of God.)

It is not only a commandment of Holy Scripture, but a postulate of reason as well, that justice must be understood as a prerequisite for peace.

The violent upholding of unjust structures, as a rule, leads to counter-violence, to passive and active resistance, and to revolution. Political ideologies can quickly develop into substitute religions, which then subordinate reason to the principles of the ideology or to the emotions. Ultimately the political opponent is demonised and communication is broken off. Reason demands immediate, fundamental, political and social change with greater justice to end the violence.

3.4 Such changes require the expertise of politicians and experts. This expertise may again not be subordinate to foreign principles, be they ideologies or emotions. Rather it is confronted by the question: What needs to be done, in what manner, here and now, as the best possible, for the benefit of all?

3.5 The present situation demands that representatives and experts of all groups and sectors enter into dialogue with one another without delay, and co-operate not only with a view to achieving the necessary changes, but also with regard to problems which will arise thereafter; problems, which will by no means disappear once racial segregation has been abolished.

3.6 We appeal to those overseas, who bear responsibility in politics, economy, and society, for the sake of their responsibility towards the world, to make an attempt to

- overcome national egotism
- practise more justice between first and third worlds
- so that peace may be brought about and maintained
- not simply to impose European structures and criteria on the third world
- approach the fellow man in the third world with helpful criticism, even if a guilty conscience dating back to the colonial era, and a feeling of superiority make this difficult.

As first and third world situations clash in South Africa, as in one country, there exists an opportunity to contribute to the solution of this world problem. Making a stand for or against disinvestment, praise or condemnation, and generalised verdicts in the one or the other direction do not suffice at all. Because the problem to be solved is not confined to South Africa, the engagement and help of all responsible powers are required. The world would lose a great opportunity, should a just and peaceful solution in South Africa not succeed.

4. APPEAL TO CHURCHES AND THEOLOGIANS

We direct a brotherly appeal to the churches and theologians in South Africa, Africa and overseas, to consider our view points which are based on Lutheran doctrine.

4.1 During the so-called religious wars in the time after the reformation, differences in dogma of the various churches were used to mobilise "fighting troops". Today there is a danger that differences in ethic, which proliferate in many churches, are used to ideologically incite fighting factions. That is why we encourage the pursuit of an "ethic in the sign of the cross" which attempts to keep the two beams of the cross (world responsibility and commitment to God) together, and to endure tensions.

We warn against the pursuit of the other two types of ethic, which evolved to ever greater extent after the reformation, the conserving and the eschatological ethic.

4.1.1 The "conserving ethic" emphasizes

- responsibility for the present,
- protection of what has proved to be worthwhile,
- maintenance of order.

This ethic is based on a pessimistic view of man. He is seen only as a sinner. The possibility that man, as justified sinner, can, in the obedience of faith embark on new ways, is underestimated.

The dangers of this type of ethic are:

overlooking the responsibility for the future and for coming generations,
persevering in outdated structures,
restoration,
brutality in methods used to maintain the status quo.

4.1.2 The "eschatological ethic" emphasizes:

- concern for the future,
- responsibility for coming generations,
- the will to change society according to the criteria of the kingdom of God.

This ethic is based on an optimistic view of man, who is able to reform the world in the obedience of faith. In this case, the fact that man is a sinner and continually reverts to sin, is underestimated.

The dangers of this type of ethic are:

overlooking the past and the present, and the limitations on what is possible in the future,
violent change of existing structures,
revolution,
brutality in methods used to attain well meant goals.

4.1.3 The "ethic in the sign of the cross" attempts to achieve a realistic assessment of man, taking into account his sinfulness as well as the new obedience in faith of the justified sinner.

This means, amongst other things, that all Christians belong to the communion of sinners under the cross of the Lord where no-one may be excluded by us.

The appeals of this ethic are:

- keeping together past, present and future in a responsible manner,
- change of structures in order to maintain and pass on those values which are named in the ten commandments (e.g. life, marriage, property, human dignity),
- constant reformation to attain this,
- willingness to suffer for the sake of love,
- thus being prepared to accept genuine compromise,
- fairness in methods.

The danger of this tension-ridden ethic is:

for lack of love and willingness to suffer, digressing into one of the other two types of ethic.

4.2 We emphasize that the church of Jesus Christ must intercede especially for the underprivileged, the oppressed and those in despair, and must aid them; at the same time, however, taking fully into account that they are sinners. Honesty demands that they too have to be told words of brotherly criticism.

4.3 We consider the teaching of a sharp division between church and state to be as dangerous as the teaching that church and state, politics and religion are intermixed. In the case of a sharp division the responsibility for the world and social responsibility are underestimated and, through "neutrality", the existing status quo of society and state is accepted and even supported.

In the case of intermixing of church and state, the church attempts to usurp the responsibilities of the politician, instead of drawing his attention to those responsibilities. Here, the danger lies in attempting to bring about God's kingdom on earth by force, instead of conceding that God's kingdom comes of his own free will, without our doing.

4.4 Explicitly we warn against:

4.4.1 God-is-with-us-theologies.

They caused untold grief in the time of the crusades, or in the time of the first world war, for example. They lead into temptation of branding the opponent as Antichrist, and claim that God is only "on our side" and that only "our cause is God's cause".

4.4.2 Dogmatisation of an ethic.

Although the bible states "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Matth 7,6) it does not follow that we are empowered to deny the Christianity of another Christian, because he has made an ethical decision different to our own. We easily overlook the fact that we are all sinners and in need of God's grace.

4.5 We emphasize that it is necessary to differentiate between state and church, politics and religion, without sharply dividing the two. The church owes it to the state to preach justice, to call for reason and the exercise of skill, and to warn against ideologizing (substitute religion).

This service of the church to the state, economy and society is particularly called for in the present crisis situation.

It is part of our reply to God's act of reconciliation in Christ, who calls us to

- live and preach reconciliation,
- reduce thinking in terms of friends and enemies,
- overcome fear through renewed trust,
- foster understanding between people,

- bring them to one table,
- encourage a willingness to listen to one another.

5. APPEALS TO OUR CONGREGATIONS

We appeal to our congregations and members of our congregations to furthermore take to heart the following:

- 5.1 As white Lutherans we only perceive a small part of the reality of this country as a whole. We can hardly conceive of the threats with which our sisters and brothers of other colours have to contend, particularly in the urban areas.

We want to listen to the message of reconciliation of Christ all the more, and to learn to become a congregation and a church with others and for others. The following guide lines are intended to help us practice this reconciliation in everyday life.

5.1.1 INVOLVEMENT (Identification)

God nears man through the man Jesus. This is not friendly condescension but love giving itself. In the person of Jesus, God becomes our fellow man and brother.

For us this means:

answering God's love and passing it on,
 being close to our fellow man,
 listening to him,
 understanding him,
 placing ourselves in his position,
 laughing and crying with him,
 finding out what he needs
 accepting him with all the fears and anxieties, which his situation entails for him.

5.1.2. CRITICAL DISTANCE (Distantiation)

God's absolute demand, his law, shows us that we are sinners and live in a communion of sinners.

For us this means:

examining our own actions and behaviour critically,
 viewing our fellow man critically,
 speaking the word of truth, even the criticising word,
 assessing one another in terms of God's criteria,
 not to have false consideration for colour or status,
 together assessing our actions, our church, our political structures and our world according to God's criteria.

5.1.3 HOPE FOR THE FUTURE (Anticipation)

The church itself is a sign of Christ's future in our world. It has an anticipatory (opening the future) quality.

God's reply to Good Friday is Easter. The resurrection of Jesus gives us hope. In communion under his word and sacrament, we experience the presence of Him who rose from the dead and the light of God's kingdom in our world.

For us this means:

We cannot bring about heaven on earth, create paradise on earth, and we cannot realise a Christian state.

We can, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, testify to God's reality
 by giving love where there is hate,
 by forgiving where one is insulted,
 by encouraging faith where doubt depresses

by bringing hope to those in despair.

The love of God creates a mutuality in the congregation of Christ (communio sanctorum) which can point the way for all other communities.

5.1.4 LIFE AS SERVICE TO GOD (Celebration).

We may understand our entire lives to be a service to God. This entails the missionary calling, the diaconical and social duties of the church as well as having time for the family and the Sunday service. Here we mean joy and gratefulness, trust and the fullness of life.

This we experience especially in Holy Communion. God celebrates with us both as host and as offering, in bread and wine. He gives us grace, to live and act out of the power of reconciliation. He allows us to experience true fellowship, which is filled with joy and bears testimony to him, the Lord.

Jesus views our whole life, and not just certain occasions as dialogue with God. That is what he showed us in his life through prayer, word and deed.

For us this means:

that we are open to God,
that we pray with and for one another,
that we are open towards one another,
that we grant one another the greatest possible fulfilment in life,
that we consider our work and the manner in which we deal with one another,
as service to God.

5.2 The unity talks with the predominantly "black" sister church, which the synod of 1985 decided upon, want to be accompanied by practical steps towards church unity at all levels.

That is why we want to intensify the existing communion with the sister congregations through

- common services on a more regular basis
- co-operation amongst the various congregational groups
- small, shared diaconical projects,
- reciprocal visits by members of congregations,
- interceding in prayer for one another
- reciprocal help.

At church and diocesan level we are planning common missionary parishes and vicarages, special parish tasks such as counselling of the sick in the hospitals in the cities. This co-operation will facilitate the merger under a common church constitution which is yet to be formulated.

Times of uncertainty and instability can always also be times when Christian life is re-examined and invigorated. We want to utilise the present situation as a time of return to God and to pray for the guidance of the Holy spirit.

5.3 Together we want to try, in our congregations and in our personal lives, to erect signs of hope, however humble they might be.

We thank all those who are doing this in their personal sphere and are glad about their engagement.

6. In our attempt, to express a word of hope, we have not been able to give due consideration to many aspects. Yet some will think it excessive, and others will think it too little.

In spite of everything, let us stand together under the call of Christ. Come to me all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and

learn from me: for I am gentle and lowly in heart: and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

(Matth.11,28-30).

(Translation from the German original)