

CHRIST IS MY LIFE
CONSTRUCTIVE RESPONSES FROM THE FAITH COMMUNITY
TO THE PRESENT SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHALLENGES IN SOUTH AFRICA

‘For me to live is Christ’ (Philippians 1:21)

SYNODICAL REPORT
to the
60th REGULAR SYNODICAL CONVENTION
of the
FREE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD IN SOUTH AFRICA (FELSISA)

Esteemed Synodical Convention, honoured delegates and guests, dear brothers and sisters.

1. Spiritual reflection on the topic

In preparing for a sermon early this year during the Passion Season I came across a report known as the *World Happiness Report*. It is being published annually since 2002. It struck me simply because of the intense awareness that the South African society, including the churches, are presently struggling both economically and emotionally.

It came to no surprise really to see which countries enjoy the highest ranking. At the beginning of 2018 the top five happiest countries in the world were Finland, Norway, Denmark, Iceland and Switzerland. Realising that criteria are set by the researches, the main factors that determine the happiness of a country nevertheless make interesting reading. They are in this order: a caring and generous community, freedom, honesty, health, regular income, and good governance. It might be surprising to some that excessive wealth, often a phenomenon of greed so prevalent in our country both in the distant and recent past, is not listed as a factor at all. This is further underlined by the fact that happiness levels in China have not risen in the past forty years, despite a remarkable per capita growth. This might also explain the happiness ranking of the USA. It was ranked 3rd in 2007, but has since then dropped to 18th. It could become worse.

African countries, generally known for a lack of good governance, do not enjoy a good ranking at all, with South Africa not even featuring amongst the five happiest countries in Africa. Even Somalia is ranked above it. The 2017 report on Africa had the heading *Happiness in waiting*. It seems like Africans are always *waiting* for a better future.

The 2018 *World Happiness Report* focuses primarily on migration trends with a special focus on the question, whether immigrants living in a different country are happier. It is true for refugees, of course (10% of all immigrants), but not necessarily for other immigrants, the difference in happiness being as little as 0.01%.

Are you happy? Or is your life also characterised by a happiness *in waiting*?

It is against this backdrop that we wish to reflect on the life of the apostle Paul and the words that form the theme of our convention: CHRIST IS MY LIFE! The direct translation of Philippians 1:21 reads: “*For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.*” It will strike you that CHRIST forms the central

word of that line. This is highlighted to reaffirm the centrality of CHRIST both in the church and our everyday lives, all within man's endless endeavour to find true happiness.

Philippians 1:21 stands out when one considers both the personal circumstances of Paul's life and the main theme of his letter. This letter is generally known as the *Letter of Joy*. The reasons are obvious. In no other letter, written by Paul, does the word "joy" (4x) (1:1, 25, 26; 2:1) or "rejoice" (9x) (1:18a; 18b, 2:17, 18; 3:1; 4:1; 4:4, 10) feature as often as in this letter. The most well-known verse, that should wake us every morning, is: ***"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"*** (4:4).

What strikes you in reading these words, apart of Paul's rejoicing being "in the Lord," is that *none* of the factors that contribute to the happiness, mentioned above, are present in Paul's life. There is no good governance, no regular income, no proper health care, and definitely no freedom. The circumstances of his life are dire, to say the least. He is in prison, not for murder, rape or corruption, but for proclaiming that "Jesus Christ is Lord" (2:11) - a mandate he had received from Christ himself. Faithfully living his calling landed him in prison, with not much hope of ever making it out of prison alive. Within the Roman empire it was not unusual for a guard to walk into prison and perform an execution if called upon to do so by the authorities. No wonder some members of Paul's congregation in Philippi went to visit him to inquire about his well-being. Imagine the surprise when they encountered a rejoicing apostle. What was he rejoicing about?

First, he was rejoicing because *against all expectations*, sitting behind closed doors, God had opened a door for him to share the Gospel of Christ with Roman guards, something which he in his wildest dreams would not have imagined. CHRIST being his life, he discovered that even in prison, where others intended to do him harm, God had a plan and a purpose for him. He writes: ***"As a result [of my imprisonment] it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ"*** (1:13). Christ was being preached - that is the source of his joy. Paul marvels and rejoices at the fact that even in prison God's purposes are being fulfilled.

It is not unlike the story of Joseph, the patriarch, who was sold by his brothers to a travelling trader on the way to Egypt. When years later, after his father's death, the brothers approached him to seek forgiveness for their horrendous deed, he exclaimed: ***"Don't be afraid. I am in the place of God. You intended to harm me, but God intended good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives"*** (Gen.50:20).

"I am in the place of God!" What a wonderful thing to realise! Joseph, of course, said these particular words in *hindsight*. In responding to his visitors and writing this letter, Paul was still finding himself in the middle of an unfolding story. His repeated words "I rejoice" are words of faith in a God, who has guided his people throughout history, called and saved them through the sacrifice of his Son, continues to hold them in his hands, and is able to use all circumstances of life for their benefit and his purposes.

Secondly, Paul rejoices because of the knock-on effect that his imprisonment had on the congregation. ***"[M]ost of the brothers in the Lord,"*** Paul says, ***"have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly"*** (1:14). For his visitors however this was not without its challenges. Deeply concerned they shared with the apostle that some of those preaching Christ in his absence do so out of "envy" and "rivalry" towards him. The details of this rivalry are

not spelled out, but seem to include efforts to discredit the apostle in his absence. But note how Paul responds to his visitors: “[I] rejoice. Yes and I will continue to rejoice” (1:18b). Paul, is not concerned about his own reputation and the motives of others ... as long as CHRIST is preached.

These words call on us to pause for inner-reflection. They pose the all important question of our primary purpose: “For me to live is [what]?” On what do I spend my energy? What are my ambitions? What do I hope to achieve? What do I long for?

Paul’s answer is clear: “***For me to live is CHRIST.***” For him everything revolves around Christ, his Saviour. “To live Christ,” is something you can do in South Africa, Rwanda, Australia or China. It can be done in prosperous economic times characterised by social cohesion. But it can also be done in times of deep struggle, racial tensions, and near economic collapse. The words “***For me to live is Christ***” are to be heard as an *invitation*, joy always being the unexpected package that is not sought after, but the result of living for others and being content in the sure knowledge: In Christ my relationship with God has been restored and nothing can separate me from his love.

Sharing this message - in all circumstances of life - is our calling and our joy.

2. **Keynote address**

The Synodical Council has again invited a keynote speaker to the Synodical Convention to speak on the sub-heading of our convention: *Constructive responses from the faith community to the present social and political challenges in South Africa.*

The new democratic dispensation in 1994 brought much hope to our country. The appointed *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (TRC) helped many South Africans to work through the past and created the vision of a *rainbow nation*, in which people of different racial and ethnic groups would live in peace with one another and enjoy equal rights and opportunities. Churches, such as the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), made public apologies for the pain that their policies and ideologies caused others. During this time great investments were made in South Africa, which helped to boost the economy. But much has changed in recent years. In what many have called the “lost decade” corruption and maladministration has become the norm in South Africa, the effects of which will still be felt for many years to come. A “new dawn” has been announced, but the sun is slow in rising as the country is being threatened by another economic recession. The economy has literally come to a stand still, making it even more difficult than before to address inequalities of the past and to provide a more just and prosperous life to all.

The announced investigation into *State Capture* has been widely welcomed, but the ruling parties policy change on *Land Expropriation Without Compensation* has led to very diverse reactions, often fuelling increased racial tension within the country. Some argue vehemently that land should be returned to “the people” - *now* and indeed *without compensation*, while others believe that the lack of land distribution is the result of failed policy implementations by the state and that any amendment to section 25 of the South African Constitution would erode property rights in general, stunt the economy even more, cause more job losses, and lead to food shortages, despite the assurance given by the ruling party that policy changes would be implemented in a way that would boost the economy.

The FELSISA is affected. Many of its members, as it is with the Dutch Reformed Church, form part of the agricultural sector of our country. Proposed policy changes affect their lives directly, threaten their very livelihood and causes uncertainty and fear in view of the future. The latter often results not only in less investments and community projects, but a greater drive to secure their own.

The question which the Synodical Council wishes to address is what the *call* of the Church is, not only as a critical and corrective word towards the state, but also as a voice that addresses the fears of its own members and also to provide the necessary spiritual guidance to respond *constructively* to the challenges that society faces.

For this purpose an invitation has been extended to Professor Piet Meiring from the Dutch Reformed Church. Prof. Meiring is a highly respected theologian, who since 1968 served as minister, academic, general secretary, and moderator of his church. His contributions in South Africa, however, transcend those of a theologian or academic. In 1996 he was appointed to the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* and subsequently served on reconciliation structures in a number of countries throughout the world. Although being retired he was most recently, in 2017, still awarded the Chancellor's Medal by the University of Pretoria in acknowledgment of his contributions to South Africa. His presentations will hopefully serve the purpose not to necessarily reach agreement in all points, but to promote dialogue that will equip the pastors of the FELSISA, congregational delegates and others to positively engage with those in their respective communities in a way that will promote CHRIST and highlight the opportunities, provided by God himself, for the spreading of his Gospel. If indeed “Christ is my life” few countries in the world provide us with better opportunities to serve our Lord.

3. Liberation through Commemoration and the Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (LCSA)

“Liberation through Commemoration” was the topic of the 59th Regular Synodical Convention of the FELSISA held in Kirchdorf. The topic itself wanted to highlight that “liberation” (in the sense of forgiveness and reconciliation) is achieved by “commemoration” (i.e. consciously working though and remembering the past). Two presentations were held, one by Prof. Werner Klän on the topic, *How to cope with hurt and grief in personal life*, and the other by Dr. Karl Böhmer on the topic, *Intentional forgetting and intentional remembering: Past and present*. Both presentations were well received, but it was the latter presentation that especially touched the hearts of the listeners. Being presented by one of our own and consciously remembering what had happened in the past to promote still existing divisions, was a valuable (first) step in overcoming hurt and working towards healing also between the two confessional Lutheran Churches in South Africa, the FELSISA and the *Lutheran Church in Southern Africa* (LCSA).

This was followed by a meeting of the church councils in Piet Retief on 8 November 2016. During this meeting the Synodical Council of the FELSISA expressed its wish to engage more with the LCSA to deal with the past and also to promote more joint church festivals. The intent was to have a joint Reformation celebration in 2017 during which the FELSISA would commemorate its 125th anniversary and the LCSA its 50th anniversary. The LCSA however decided it would serve its church better to have its anniversary celebration within their own community and at the same time commemorate the 500th Reformation anniversary. These anniversary celebrations of the LCSA took place in Soweto on 28-29 October. President Anthony Streinbromm (LCMS - New Jersey district) and

the Bishop of the FELSISA, amongst others, had opportunities to preach and make presentations at what was an extremely enriching festival under the topic *Here I am, send me! Mission and new frontiers*.

In some way this anniversary celebration and also the talk held by the FELSISA Bishop served to build bridges for LCSA pastors to attend the joint “Pastors’ Conference” of the FELSISA and the LCSA (the first one held in many years) in Wartburg from 8-10 January 2018. As attendance was voluntary and not only pastors but also some co-workers of the LCSA participated, it was later called a co-workers gathering. The purpose of the gathering was to talk about the past and the present and in particular to create a safe space to share hurts and guilts that continue to burden relationships. The services of two facilitators were secured, Dr. Kobus Gerber (Dutch Reformed Church) and Rev. Sikawu Makubalo (Methodist Church), who have been actively involved in reconciliatory workshops in South Africa. At the end a jointly formulated *Memorandum of Understanding* (MOU) was formulated, which highlights the common issues that need attention. It was published in the FELSISA newsletter and pastors were encouraged to both share and discuss the MOU with their church councillors. It is of the utmost importance that values of love and respect are nurtured in the knowledge that we all belong to the same Lord and opportunities are sought to actively engage one another. Special care should be taken that political resentments are not carried over into the church, but that we continually engage with one another as true and equal partners tasked to spread the Gospel of Christ and to be an example to the world that political, cultural and ethnic boundaries are transcended when CHRIST IS OUR LIFE. Schedule overload and monetary restraints makes regular meetings difficult, but the FELSISA envisages a joint conference or gathering of pastors and co-workers at least every two years and hopefully a joint festival in the near future.

4. Relationship with other churches

The positive encounters with the LCSA were largely overshadowed by renewed tensions with other churches, in particular with our neighbouring Lutheran Church, the *Evangelical Lutheran Church in South Africa (Natal-Transvaal)* (ELCSA, N-T). The tension erupted at the FELSISA’s 500th Reformation commemoration, held during the Brass Band Festival in Wittenberg on 30 June 2017 under the theme *solus Christus* (Christ alone). As always, neighbouring congregations of other churches were invited. It was a wonderful celebration. Especially heart-warming was the brass band performance of members of the LCSA, who (together with others) had joined our choir. However a talk held on the three *solis* (*grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone*) led to widespread reactions. The presenter wished to show why confessional Lutherans were compelled by the *solis* not to engage in church unionism when there is not full agreement in doctrine, while encouraging churches where there is agreement in doctrine to practice such established church fellowship. What the presenter intended to communicate was however not *heard* in the same manner by all listeners, which in turn raised the old question, whether church festivals or public worship, where there is no opportunity to engage the speaker, is indeed the appropriate place to highlight differences. In the hope to calm emotions in both churches, the bishops of the ELCSA (N-T) and the FELSISA met and formulated a joint letter, focussing not on the talk itself, but rather on Christ’s prayer in John 17. The letter tried to highlight that Christ *prays* for his church, encouraged its members to do the same, and stressed that being one, as Christ is one with the Father, is imperative for the witness of Christ to the world (v. 2, 23). This letter, however, was also *heard* in different ways and led to diverging reactions. These diverging reactions have brought to the fore the immense *hurt* that exists between the two churches, which in turn deepened the resolve of the bishops and their councils that talking *with* one another (as

both church councils had previously committed to) is imperative, not only for the sake of peaceful coexistence but for the sake of God's mission in the world. Differences need to be addressed and worked through even if complete unity is not achieved.

Our partner church in Germany (SELK) serves as a good example. After extensively investigating the history that led to the formation of the SELK (i.e. the Free Evangelical Lutheran Churches) and the *Union of Evangelical Churches* (UEK) a joint repentance service was held on 22 November 2017 in Berlin, where each church acknowledged the hurt it caused the other. Bishop Voigt noted that it is "moving and liberating, when the suffering of faithful mothers and fathers is noted in history [...] This leads to us more clearly recognising and acknowledging our own failures, inappropriate harshness, and self-sufficiency [...]"

The Synodical Council has recognised the need to prioritise the talks with the ELCSA (N-T). After consulting with the ELCSA (N-T) a joint Theological Working Group has been established consisting Drs. Heinz Hiestermann (co-chairman) and Karl Böhmer from the FELSISA and pastors Udo Lütge (co-chairman) and Hugo Filter from the ELCSA (N-T). A first combined meeting is scheduled for August 2018.

5. All Lutheran Service

The intend of holding an *All Lutheran Service* in 2017 was already announced at the 2016 Synodical Convention. At that point a joint committee of all Lutheran Churches had already been established, with a report compiled for the convention by the FELSISA representative.

Realising that not many South Africans would be reached by the church specific Reformation celebrations, the intend of holding a combined service of all Lutherans was always to reach as many South Africans as possible and to give witness of the Lutheran faith and heritage in a largely Reformed/Calvinistic country. As the different Lutheran Churches are not in established church fellowship with one another this All Lutheran Service was always seen as a "ecumenical service" Organisers of the event were requested to take into consideration and abide by the *Explanations and Guidelines for Ecumenical Encounters* (i.e. *Ecumenical Guidelines*) of the FELSISA, which they did. The purpose of the service was clearly spelled out by the advertising poster, *A public witness to the free grace of Christ by all Lutherans standing together*, the words "standing together" replacing the word "united" (originally proposed) as not to feign a unity that has not been formally established. Respecting our confessional stance, the organisers also refrained from celebrating Holy Communion together. The service, held on 27 August, was well attended and was broadcasted on national television every day for one week. It was and continues to be our prayer that this service will have contributed to bring Christ to many.

In the light of the above, criticism of the event, in particular the FELSISA's and also the LCSA's participation, came as a surprise. In hindsight it seems as if partner churches have diverging policies on whether officiating with a women pastor *per se* disqualifies the participation in any joint, ecumenical service (the prepared general prayer at the All Lutheran Service was spoken by three women pastors). The topic of officiating with women pastors is not addressed by the *Ecumenical Guidelines* of the FELSISA with the SELK handout *Ecumenical Responsibility* (1994) stating that "officiating with ordained women is subject to advisory instructions from the church council."

The *Ecumenical Guidelines* of the FELSISA as well as the advisory note from the SELK have been used by the Synodical Council in planning ecumenical events and providing advice to others. It is our plea that should individuals within the FELSISA or partner churches abroad disagree with what is presently accepted policy in the FELSISA, such differences should be cleared by means of theological debate and should not be discussed in the public sphere in a manner that creates dissent within the confessional Lutheran family or within the FELSISA itself. It may be noted that the *Ecumenical Guidelines* of the FELSISA were widely circulated to its partner churches before being tabled for acceptance at a Synodical Convention. At the same time it should be noted that the FELSISA has always given room for those who as a matter of conscience feel uncomfortable or unable to participate in certain ecumenical events.

6. **Ecumenism and Unionism**

In view of the tensions that characterised the 2017 Reformation celebrations it might be helpful to distinguish between unionism and ecumenism.

Unionism can be defined as a policy to unite churches despite differences in doctrine and practice. It is largely traced back to the Prussian Union of Churches, when Protestant churches (Lutheran and Reformed denominations) were merged in 1817 from a series of decrees by Frederick William III. Based among other on John 17:17, where Jesus prays that his disciples might be sanctified by the truth, with *God's Word* being the truth, confessional Lutherans have rejected any unity that is not based on agreement in God's Word and all articles of faith. Where such unity is, however, established it leads to the declaration of formal Church Fellowship, that is, *unrestricted* altar and pulpit exchange.

Ecumenism on the other hand strictly speaking seeks to define the world-wide (universal) nature and extend of God's Church and mission. Insofar as the Confessional Lutheran Church confesses the (one) holy Christian Church it is in the true sense of the word "ecumenical." It recognises that despite doctrinal differences, there is wide-ranging agreement expressed, amongst other, in the so called Ecumenical Creeds (The Apostle's, Nicene and Athanasian Creeds). Based on such agreement (and realising that wherever Christ is preached, the Holy Spirit can and does work faith), churches not in church fellowship with one another can under certain circumstances and adhering to certain guidelines come together to promote the Gospel of Christ as a common witness to the world. This can be done, among other, in the form of working agreements or combined services for a particular purpose. The *Ecumenical Guidelines* of the FELSISA seek to define such ecumenical encounters, realising that complete confessional unity has not been reached but continues to be the desire and the goal of those who have been granted faith in Christ by grace alone.

The above is written in the awareness that the word "ecumenism" has taken on expanded and varying meanings, but seek to clarify how it is understood in the guidelines of the FELSISA.

7. **FELSISA: A common vision**

The FELSISA is bound to the Holy Scriptures as the infallible Word of God inspired by the Holy Scriptures as the sole source and guiding principle of Faith and Doctrine. It further accepts the Symbolic Book of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as the true and binding statement and exposition of the Holy Scriptures (Constitution of the FELSISA, par 1.1.1.2 and 1.1.1.3). Together they form

both the source and the basis for all theological reflection and deliberation. Each generation of Christians however is called upon to proclaim the Gospel in its particular context. In doing so it reflects on the challenges it faces, which in turn evolves into a common vision informed by the values of the Christian faith.

Such a vision was presented to the FELSISA shortly after the elections in 2010. The vision was informed by the prescribed sermon text for the 2nd Sunday after Trinity, with the sermon itself being held at the Brass Band Festival in Kirchdorf. The topic of the Sunday was the *Great Invitation*, based on Jesus' parable of the *Great Banquet* (Lk 14:16-22), where those initially invited did not accept the invitation, leading to the host sending his servant on the streets to invite the social and religious outcasts (the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame) to the banquet. The parable highlights that "all" are invited. God's grace extends beyond conventional boundaries. The sermon text (Eph 2:14-22), the epistle reading for the Sunday, is a practical application of this truth in a congregation where new barriers of hostility between Jewish and Gentile Christians were being erected. The apostle makes a passionate plea for peace, reminding his congregation that the law with its commandments and regulations has been abolished in the flesh and that in God's household there are no longer any foreigners and aliens. Based on God's grace, there are only fellow citizens and members of God's household. Applied to the FELSISA the conclusion was drawn that barriers that led to divisions along language and ethnic lines were to be overcome. The FELSISA is to be a church for "all" South Africans irrespective of their social, cultural or ethnic background. This, of course, does not exclude the proclamation of the Gospel in the mother tongue embedded within certain cultural practices. But linguistic and cultural identity is to be clearly subordinated to the common identity that all Christians have in Christ and their common witness to the world. The second conclusion related to the FELSISA's relationship to Christians within other church bodies (denominations). Theological exchange and a clear confession of Biblical truths will always be called for as Paul himself does when his congregations are faced (both from within or from the outside) with false teachings, which reflect away from God's unmerited act of salvation in Christ. But other believers in Christ are not (by default) our "enemies," they are not foreigners or aliens, but like us fellow citizens and members of God's household, brothers and sisters in Christ. We rejoice when we see God at work in their midst and when God's grace draws us closer together, as it saddens us when it doesn't, prompting us to engage even more with them. Both conclusions became guiding principles for the Bishop in particular and the Synodical Council in general.

A common vision gained greater clarity when in 2011 the pastors of the FELSISA prepared a booklet on the *Values, Mission and Vision of the FELSISA*. Own values were scrutinised in the light of Scripture, with the core values ***Trusting, Welcoming, Caring*** now gracing the letterhead of the FELSISA. This booklet has served a wonderful purpose when the Bishop had the opportunity (both locally and abroad) to talk about the FELSISA, its many challenges, and the values that guide it in its decision making - always, of course, against the backdrop of Holy Scripture itself being the normative rule (*norma normans*) and sole source of all teaching, with the Lutheran Confessions being the secondary rule (*norma normata*).

Lack of a clear vision and competing values (or not clearly defined values) will inevitably lead to misunderstandings, dissenting voices, and strife. Value, mission and vision statements are of course conceptual models that are a *simplified* version of reality, similar to the *solis* of the Reformation. There is always room for more differentiated dialogue, but they nevertheless serve as a helpful guide and promote structured conversation.

The vision statements (based on the identified core values) formulated by the pastors in 2011, have remained a prayer guide for the Bishop and are presented here again, both for inner reflection and heartfelt prayer for a Synod that seeks to confess clearly and fulfil the mission of God joyfully:

- We see and pray for a Lutheran Church that has discovered its identity in Christ, following Christ, trusting God's Word alone and always moving forward.
- We see and pray for a Lutheran Church where dependency on God's grace is a virtue and the Cross of Christ is proclaimed faithfully.
- We see and pray for a Lutheran Church where grace of Christ is central and grace flows in and out.
- We see and pray for a Lutheran Church with different people, united in Christ, sharing his grace with all - without fear of loss or domination.
- We see and pray for a Lutheran Church where everybody is a missionary, eager to share Christ with family members, friends, and the people in their community.
- We see and pray for a Lutheran Church that having found its eternal treasure in Christ, is kind and cares for the poor, the marginalised and the needy of this world.

8. Resolutions of the last Synodical Convention

8.1 Secretary for the Bishop and the Office of the Bishop

It had been suggested that a secretary is employed for the Bishop as he serves both as the bishop of synod and a pastor of a congregation. As a first step a budget allocation was made for a secretary. The hope of finding a secretary close to the bishop, with whom he could converse regularly, has not materialised. In the light of what at some point seemed to be an overabundance of pastors, consideration was again given to the position of a full-time bishop, who could then also visit congregations of the FELSISA more regularly. The way forward remains unresolved.

Due to the health problems that the Bishop had near the end of 2017, there is consensus that the Office of the Bishop, that is, his range of responsibilities, need to be shared more equally amongst the members of the Synodical Council. A list of responsibilities has been prepared by the Bishop, which in turned raised the topic of succession planing. It is imperative that synod gives prayerful consideration at an elective convention, not only of who can best serve on the Synodical Council promoting Synod's confessional stance, but also who has the leadership skills to take on the wide-ranging responsibilities presently associated with the Bishop and could possibly replace the Bishop should he unexpectedly pass away or not be reelected. There is agreement that organising and chairing of meetings can be shared better, with clergy on the Synodical Council also taking responsibility for the Pastors' Convention and maybe some other official meetings that have been attended and/or led by the Bishop in the past. At the end of 2017 some concrete steps (to be reported on below) were already taken with regard to the Theological and Exam Commissions of the FELSISA.

8.2 Trilateral Commission on Apartheid

This commission, chaired by Prof. Werner Klän (SELK), is in the final phase of completing its work. Its focus was on researching the past so that dialogue between the partners could be based on what can be historically substantiated. The *Reader* (a compilation of all documents) will hopefully be

completed in this year, with another possible meeting (and maybe final meeting) scheduled for later this year. This *Reader* is to serve as a helpful guide for future meetings of the affected churches on the journey towards reconciliation and better mutual support.

8.3 ELF Synodical Levies Write off

Based on the special circumstances presented, the Synodical Convention agreed to write off the unpaid levies of the *English Lutheran Fellowship* (ELF). In the past synodical period the Synodical Council engaged the ELF regularly for an update on its financial obligations, which were gratefully met in the past two years. The greatest challenge for the congregation, in addition to all other expenses, is the loan repayment to the FELSISA for the parsonage.

8.4 Secondment of Dr. Karl Böhmer to the Seminary

Based on the resolution passed by the Synodical Convention in 2016, Dr. Karl Böhmer was seconded to the *Lutheran Theological Seminary* (LTS) in Tshwane. A roll-over contract of three years (1 January 2017 to 31 December 2019) was signed between the FELSISA and Dr. Karl Böhmer. At the same time a *Memorandum of Understanding* was agreed on with the *Mission of Lutheran Churches* (LTS) regarding his remuneration, with the FELSISA contributing 10% more to his salary package each year (set as a guideline). The salary is administrated by the FELSISA. Dr. Böhmer's installation took place on 5 February 2017.

8.5 Amendments to the Service Regulations and Vacation and Long Leave of Pastors

These amendments were prepared as an *addendum* to the service contracts of the pastors. With the exception of two pastors, all FELSISA pastors have signed the addendum or on accepting a call to another FELSISA congregation signed the new Contract of Service.

8.6 Amendments to the FELSISA Constitution

After the 2016 synodical convention the FELSISA's constitution was amended and copies in pdf format were made available to all pastors and congregations. We thank Pastor Harry Niebuhr for this work.

8.7 Other resolutions

All other resolutions by the 2016 Convention were addressed and will be reported on either as part of this report, or in reports to be presented during the convention.

9. Work of the Synodical Council

Since September 2016 to June 2018 the synodical council had 10 meetings. As in the past effort was made from time to time to hold the meeting within a local congregation to have an opportunity to engage with the church council members. Church councils are encouraged to request such an informal meeting with the members of the synodical council.

As always the Synodical Council worked well together and shared their views and opinions openly

and constructively. Each member is thanked for serving the FELSISA in this position and making the time available to serve synod with such dedication and love.

Deputy Bishop Rüdiger Gevers has indicated that he will not stand for re-election onto the council. It should be further noted that Mr. Eckhardt Paul, who is willing to continue to serve on the council if he is elected, would make himself not available should his son be elected onto the Council.

10. Structure of the FELSISA

Much time was spent in the past two years by Mr. Harald Niebuhr and Bishop Reinstorf to engage FELSISA congregations on the idea of a new structure for the FELSISA. The new structure seeks to address the challenges of a FELSISA that indeed “welcomes all” who joyfully submit to its teachings and confessions. The proposed new structure forms part of the overall vision of the FELSISA to be a church for all South Africans, irrespective of their ethnicity or social status. The proposal was further motivated by congregations that have already joined the FELSISA as associated members, their associated membership being necessitated by the inability to contribute to Synod based on the number of confirmed members, whereby congregations are levied irrespective of the social standing of its members, many of whom come from disadvantaged communities. The present levy system has worked well in a homogenous community, where the income of its members is similar, but has increasingly come under pressure even in established congregations of the FELSISA as either the age groups in the congregation change or new members from disadvantaged communities are accepted into the congregations. The levy system has had some unintended consequences, not least of all a negative impact on church growth with most congregations reverting to different lists of “official members” and “friends” in order to circumvent the paying of increased levies.

With the new structure it is proposed that the traditional FELSISA congregations are ring fenced with regard to their historical obligations, including the defined benefit pension of retired pastors, and that basically all congregations need to be self-sufficient, with expenses relating to joint responsibilities as a Synod (education of its students, medical aid contributions to its pensioners, establishment of new congregations, mission work, pastors conferences and other synodical meetings, etc) being funded by means of a “solidarity fund,” to which each congregation contributes *voluntarily*. For this to succeed, not only stronger congregations, but also individual members of the FELSISA would have to show a high level of spiritual maturity that will lead to generous giving based on blessings received for the building of God’s kingdom.

Based on visits made, the Synodical Council is reluctant to embark on this venture right now. Smaller congregations seem to accept the fact that they need to be more self-sufficient, although various circumstances may prevent growth leading to congregations losing their pastors (who in turn cannot be guaranteed a calling into another congregation). Larger congregations were generally supportive of the new structure, with some at least seeing it as an opportunity to save money, instead of being *freed* (from a fixed levy) to give *more* than before. Doubtlessly the struggling South African economy and uncertainty regarding the future impacts negatively on FELSISA members.

The above has led to the decision of the Synodical Council to put the proposed new structure *on hold* without giving up the vision of a Synod that is indeed there for all South Africans, or the vision of one United Confessional Lutheran Church in the future, which in itself would necessitate a different

structure. To prepare for this new structure the Synodical Council has tabled a proposal to go ahead with a “solidarity fund” that runs parallel to the present levy system, which will be discussed later during the convention.

11. Pastors’ Convention

During the period of this report two pastors’ conventions were held. The first one was held in Hoedspruit from 29 May to 1 June 2017. The overarching topic was *Mission*. Having accepted an invitation as guests of the convention, both the Mission Director of the SELK, Roger Zieger, and the Mission Representative of the *Mission of Lutheran Churches* (MLC), Christoph Weber, attended the first two days, each with an extensive presentation on both new trends in mission and a report on the various mission projects of the MLC. Various pastors of the FELSISA also reported on mission projects within their own congregations.

From the pastors’ convention it can also be reported that Dr. Karl Böhmer is in the process of publishing a book on the History of the FELSISA. This book will be more comprehensive than those presently available and will include the history of the FELSISA until the end of 2017. Dr. Böhmer had initially hoped to complete the Book for the 125th Anniversary celebration of the FELSISA, which was held at the German School in Pretoria on 8 October 2017 in conjunction with the FELSISA’s annual Choir Festival. He furthermore hoped to include the history of the individual FELSISA congregations in this edition, but these will now hopefully be published in a second edition. We thank Dr. Böhmer for his efforts. Synod is reminded of the booklet on the history of the FELSISA written by president (em) Peter Ahlers. Copies in both German and English are still available for R30 (obtainable from Kirchdorf congregation).

The second pastors’ convention took place at the Heyshoop Dam (between Piet Retief and Panbult) from 14-16 May 2018. This convention focussed on the *Art of Preaching* presented in five lessons by Dr. Daniel Schmidt (SELK). The invitation to Dr. Schmidt is to be seen as part of our efforts to provide our pastors with *Refresher Courses*, with another course being presented by two visiting LTS lecturers, Prof John Pless and Rev. Michael Meyer (both from the LCMS), from 13-15 August 2018. The hosts, who made their houses at the dam available to the pastors are thanked.

Pastor Roland Johannes has been working on a *Simplified Order of Service* for smaller English congregations. It was first used at the pastors’ convention and will again be used at this year’s Synodical Convention.

12. Church Councillors Meetings

The church councillors meeting held on 4-5 November 2016 at the FELS-Retreat (Paulpietersburg) focused on Pastoral Care, with some very practical everyday guidelines both for pastors and church councillors as they visit members on the fringes of the congregation or do home and hospital visits. Presentations were made by pastors Helmut Paul, Matthias Albers and Roland Johannes.

The next church councillors meeting was held at the same venue, on 3-4 November 2017. It focussed on the 15th century Reformation with applications for us today. Pastors Heinz Hiestermann, Martin Paul and Thomas Beneke were the main presenters.

13. **Associations in the FELSISA**

The children, teenage and youth associations all give separate reports to the synodical convention. We thank all pastors and laity involved in organising the various Bible camps. The youth organisation has changed its constitution to make provision for a 3rd youth pastor, when necessary. Pastor Martin Paul (Pretoria) has been elected.

After serving as the chairman of the Brass Band Association Mr. Ingbert Hillermann (Kirchdorf) decided to step down in 2018. We thank him for his faithful and committed service over many years. Mr. Hillermann has been replaced by Mr. Rudolf Kruse (Lüneburg). He was inducted into his office during the Brass Band Festival held in Uelzen on 24 June 2018.

Dr. Manfred Johannes (Pretoria) will be stepping down as the principle director of the Choir Festival. A new director is to be elected on 6 October 2018, just before the choir festival in Kirchdorf on 7 October 2018.

The organist association continues to hold valuable training courses for the organists in Synod. It is noted that in the past two years various congregations managed to replace their organs with new(er) ones, ensuring the continuation of organ music for many years to come.

14. **Office of Church Renewal**

The Synodical Council has come to the decision to leave the office of church renewal vacant. Pastor Klaus Damaske was approached to fill this office. It proved however too difficult to compile a supportive “team” as requested by Pastor Damaske.

15. **Theological Commission**

Based on the motion passed at the 2016 Synodical Convention, the Synodical Council appointed the following pastors to serve on the Theological Commission of the FELSISA: Dr. Heinz Hiestermann (chairman), Dr. Karl Böhmer, Pastor Kurt Schnackenberg (representing the Synodical Council) and the Bishop of the FELSISA as an *ex officio* member. The Theological Commission can of course co-opt members for particular fields of study.

16. **Exam Commission**

The exam commission who in the recent past consisted of the three clergy on the Synodical Council and one co-opted member has also been slightly adapted to include the following: Dr. Heinz Hiestermann (chairman), Dr. Karl Böhmer, the two clergy on the Synodical Council, Pastor Matthias Albers as a co-opted member, and the Bishop of the FELSISA as an *ex officio* member.

It should be noted that the Bishop of the FELSISA no longer serves as the chairman and convener of both the Theological and Exam Commission, but is invited to attend all meetings.

17. **Mission**

17.1 **Mission of Lutheran Churches**

The *Mission of Lutheran Churches* (MLC) met regularly during the past synodical period. The MLC is both the mission of the FELSISA and the LCSA together with the *Lutherische Kirchenmission* (LKM) in Germany. We are grateful that we can work together. Mission in Africa is indeed alive with new projects being started, both in South Africa and the rest of Africa. Apart from the Bishop, the FELSISA is represented on the Board of the MLC by Dr. Gunter Rencken (Fairland).

The Mission Representative, Rev. Christoph Weber, will give an extensive report.

17.2 Student ministry in Pretoria

In 2016 Pastor Dr. Jacob Corzine, who served the student ministry in Pretoria, accepted a call to the Concordia University in Chicago. As a result the student ministry has been put *on hold*, with a concluding report being presented to Synod by Mr. Walter Stallmann. The student youth group, that evolved out of this ministry, is presently being served by Pastor Kurt Böhmer (Pretoria - Afrikaans).

17.3 Sunday Services in Ballito

Our Saviour congregation, with the support of Kirchdorf congregation, have commenced with regular services in a house in Ballito. It is our hope that this project will at some point lead to the establishment of a new congregation.

17.4 Lutheran Education Association, South Africa (LEA-SA)

In May 2017 LEA-SA was involved in organising the *International Lutheran Education Conference* in South Africa under the topic *Global Reformation in Education: past - present - future*. At the same time the *Concordia University Chicago Wind Symphony* presented various concerts under the topic *Reformation 500: Grace for all nations*.

LEA-SA under the chairmanship of Lorna Böhmer (Durban-Westville) has prepared a blueprint to set up Early Childhood Education Development (CED) centres.

18. Lutheran Theological Seminary (LTS) in Tshwane

The chairman of the Board of Directors (BOD), Dr. Gunter Rencken will give a full report. For the purpose of this report the following can be noted:

With the conclusion of his Service Contract with the *Evangelical Church Lutheran Confession, St. Thomas congregation* on 31 December 2017, Pastor Dr. Walter Winterle was called by the *Mission of Lutheran Churches* (MLC) and seconded to the LTS to serve as its rector. The installation service was held on 4 February 2018 in the *St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Congregation*, Pretoria. As his work permit is linked to his employment to the FELSISA, the FELSISA continues to administrate his salary. The MLC provides for his salary package and reimburses the FELSISA. Pastor Dr. Winterle attends the Synodical Convention of the FELSISA as an "extraordinary member."

Mr. Hugo Meyer has accepted the call to serve as the FELSISA's director on the BOD. His proximity to Pretoria makes it easier to attend meetings and to get directly involved in the LTS. He replaced Pastor Matthias Albers (Pretoria). Board members are always appointed for a period of four

years.

Another FELSISA member, Mr. Ralf Gevers (Pretoria), has been appointed as the treasurer of the LTS.

19. Events in the Congregations, Relocations and Visitations

19.1 Emmanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church (EELC) and the Formation of the Diepkloof Evangelical Lutheran Church (DELIC)

In 2016 the Synodical Convention was already informed that Pastor Mabe from the EELC had resigned due to internal conflict in the EELC and that he joined the *St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Congregation* in Fairland. Efforts to work reconciliation were not successful. On 26 April 2017 the Bishop of the FELSISA received notice of the EELC's associated membership withdrawal, which was accepted by the Synodical Council.

Pastor Mabe's resignation from the EELC was followed by others, who then requested him to hold services for them. This led to the formation of the *Diepkloof Evangelical Lutheran Church (DELIC)* on 22 September 2016. On expressing its desire to seek (associated) membership of the FELSISA, talks were held between members of the Synodical Council and the DELIC on 26 August 2017. Based on those talks the Synodical Council has tabled a proposal for admittance of the DELIC as an associated member of the FELSISA.

19.2 Evangelical Lutheran Congregation (ELC)

The four year associated membership agreement with the ELC came to an end in 2016. At that point the congregation was not in a position to pay its pastor a full FELSISA salary as determined by the Rules and Regulations of the FELSISA. As a result a new four year associated agreement was signed on 8 October 2016. The Bishop intended to do a visitation of the congregation in 2018, but the set date had to be postponed .

19.3 Calling and Relocation of Pastors

As noted above, the Service Contract with Pastor Dr. Walter Winterle (Cape Town) came to an end on 31 December 2017. The *Evangelical Church Lutheran Confession, St. Thomas Congregation* in Cape Town then called Pastor Dieter Schnackenberg (Lüneburg) as its pastor. He was installed in the congregation on 14 January 2018.

The *Evangelical Lutheran Peter-Paul Congregation Lüneburg*, called Pastor Klaus Damaske (Pretoria - Afrikaans) as its pastor. He was installed on 14 January 2018 by Deputy Bishop Rüdiger Gevers.

The *St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Congregation* (Afrikaans) in Pretoria then called Pastor Kurt Böhmer (Uelzen) as its pastor. He was installed on 4 February 2018.

After completing his exam for the Office of the Ministry, Marlon Hiesterman was ordained as a pastor on 21 January 2018 in the *St. Peter's Lutheran Congregation* in Durban-Westville. Thereafter

the Synodical Council called him to serve the *Evangelical Lutheran Salem Congregation*, Uelzen. He commenced his placement in Uelzen on 1 February 2018. A meeting to officially call a pastor has been scheduled for 12 August 2018.

19.4 Visitations

In the past synodical period the *Evangelical Lutheran Congregation Newcastle* was visited on 4-5 March 2017. Due to an overload of events and meetings during 2017 no further official visitations were made. The Bishop visited and preached at the DELC on 3 December 2017 during a confirmation service.

As always congregations are encouraged to invite the Bishop for a visitation.

20. Personnel Situation

20.1 Pastors

The FELSISA is grateful to have an abundance of pastors to fill all vacancies. However in May 2018 Pastor Michael Ahlers (Kirchdorf) informed the Bishop that he will be relocating to our partner church in Germany, the *Selbständige Evangelische Lutherische Kirche* (SELK) later this year. We pray for God's richest blessing on the Ahlers family as they continue to serve God abroad. Attention is drawn to the *Partnership Agreements with Other Churches* (Par.15 of the FELSISA Constitution), which prescribes the procedures to be followed should pastors wish to serve in a partner church.

One of the many reasons that may have prompted Pastor Ahlers to approach the SELK is the difficulty that pastors with wives from foreign countries have in obtaining a work permit or permanent residence in South Africa. Presently the *Department of Home Affairs* makes it almost impossible, even when agencies are used. It seems easier to obtain temporary visas when the application is made in time, but no guarantees are given. This is cause for concern for the FELSISA as a number of our younger pastors (and pastors to be) have "foreign" wives.

Our heart-felt condolences are expressed with the passing away of Dr. Wilhelm Weber (Snr) on 9 December 2017 and Pastor Werner Köhne on 20 May 2018.

20.2 Vicars

Marlon Hiesterman concluded his vicarage under the supervision of Pastor Helmut Straeuli (Durban) in September 2017. This was followed by his exam for the Office of the Ministry, his ordination and placing in Uelzen.

Andreas Albers commenced his vicarage in *St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Congregation*, Fairland, under the supervision of Pastor Harry Niebuhr in April 2018. The provisional date for the commencement of his exam is April 2019.

Christian Straeuli will commence his vicarage in the *Evangelical Lutheran Congregation, Wittenberg*, under the supervision of Pastor Helmut Paul, in October 2018.

20.3 **Students of Theology**

FELSISA students of theology studying abroad (with prospective dates of completion) are: Martin Kurt Paul (2019), Markus Peschel (2020), Werner Strauli (2020) and Philip Wortmann (2022). Karsten Niebuhr started his studies at the University of Pretoria in 2018. Robert Schnackberg broke of his studies and is not longer a student of theology.

20.4 **Retirement Dates**

The next pastors that will go on retirement are: Pastor Helmut Strauli and Pastor Niebuhr (both 2021) and Dr. Dieter Reinstorf (2023).

21. **Synodical Finances**

21.1 **Treasurer and Auditor**

Financial reports and budgets will be presented by the treasurer of the FELSISA. Our heartfelt gratitude is expressed to Mr. Edmund Böhmer (Wittenberg) who serves as the treasurer of the FELSISA, and Mr. Bodo Meyer (Pretoria) who serves as auditor. Pastor Harry Niebuhr is also thanked for his continuous help to the Bishop for setting up the budget and the many reconciliations he makes with the relocations of pastors and pension payments to the pensioners.

21.2 **Congregational Support**

Within the present economic climate some congregations have not managed to meet their annual financial obligations and have approached the Synodical Council to write off levy payments to Synod. It should be noted that the FELSISA works with a very tight budget and the congregational support that can be provided is limited. Furthermore larger support amounts (that extend beyond the FELSISA budget) should be tabled at a Synodical Convention, and indeed only when the congregation's own reserves are almost depleted.

21.3 **Budget for extraordinary yet infrequent expenses**

Having discussed it with the treasurer, the Synodical Council wishes to budget for extraordinary expenses, like the salary and housing for vicars, on an annual basis to limit the effect it has on the budget when students enter their vicarage.

21.4 **Support Fund - Pastor (em) Louis Engelbrecht**

Through private initiatives donations were made in 1990s to start a *Support Fund* for Pastor (em) Louis Engelbrecht. Donations were made primarily by members of those congregations that had benefited from Pastor Engelbrecht's services (Panbult, Wittenberg and Lüneburg). At the 1998 Synodical Convention it was accepted that Synod would in future *administrate* the fund. At the same convention a contribution from synod's reserves was made of R15,795 in order to reach the targeted capital of R100,000.

At the beginning of 2018 the synodical treasurer informed the Synodical Council that the Fund had

a negative balance of R50,748.70 at the end of November 2017, with the annual amount being paid to (or on behalf of) Pastor Engelbrecht in 2017 being R38,662.50 (R3,221.88 per month). After engaging the said congregations, it became clear that there is presently no clarity on who is *responsible* for the capital injection into the fund.

In the light of the above the Synodical Council agreed to a write-off of the deficit until the end of September 2018, that is, the date of the Synodical Convention. Presently there is continued consultation with the above mentioned congregations on how to fund Pastor Engelbrecht in future, with suggestions to be made to the Synodical Convention when this report is discussed.

21.5 Assistance Fund

During the period under review Mr. Herbert Schulz resigned as a member of the MANCO. Mr Louis Meyer was appointed as his replacement, with approval from the Synodical Council. Present members: Friedel Meyer, Udo Schulz and Louis Meyer.

The reserve capital amount in the fund has been increased by an average of 6% per annum from R 500 000.00 to R 560 000.00, as per motion passed during the 2014 Synodical Convention.

In total seven pastors have a car loan with the synod, as well as two Congregations, (ELF in Randburg and ELC in Pretoria) and the Mission of Lutheran Churches (MLC). Financial Accounts are monitored and monthly updates are made by Mr. Udo Schulz. At the end of 2017 the Loan Capital amounted to R 2 240 506 with a Fund Balance of R 4 366 211. A summary of the financial statements is available on request.

The Synodical Council expresses its sincere gratitude to all MANCO members. The Assistance Fund is indeed a great help to gain quick access to loans for the pastors and congregations of Synod.

22. Pension Fund and Housing

Although it was decided at the 2014 synodical convention that the synodical council should proceed with the envisaged buy-out of all active pastors on the defined benefit fund, no progress was made due to legislative complications and delays. It should be noted however that although the affected pastors had orally indicated their willingness of a payout, these delays have caused some uncertainty as they approach retirement age. Mr. Beier will report in greater detail

Housing for pastors on retirement remains a talking point. Pastors are still encouraged to make an *Additional Voluntary Contribution* to their pension to insure a better capital growth of which 80% can be used to purchase property. The Synodical Council has however not managed to secure the services of synodical members (or others) who could advise and help the pastors to acquire property. The Synodical Council has appreciated the input of individuals in synod, like Bodo Meyer, Dr. Ludwig Böhmer and others, in presenting possible solutions. Most solutions, however, acquire a capital injection, which can not necessarily simply be added to an already strained budget.

23. Statistics

The 2016 statistics showed a slight increase of 0.72% in membership numbers, but a slight decrease

in “paying members” (confirmed members). The 2017 statistics showed a decrease of 0.79 in membership numbers, with a similar decrease in “paying members.” Fact is, over the past 20 years membership numbers (excluding associated members) have remained basically the same. It is difficult to explain. Some members emigrate. Traditional (rural) congregations are on a slow decline. Members that move to the cities or marry a partner from another church do not always find a home in one of the FELSISA city congregations. Some city congregations have seen growth (often from previously disadvantaged communities), but visiting church goers are not always immediately accepted as full members with the additional synodical levy of new membership possibly playing a role.

24. International Contacts

With Dr. Karl Böhmer being seconded to the LTS, the Synodical Council nominated Dr. Böhmer to represent the FELSISA at the *Sixth World Seminaries Conference* of the *International Lutheran Council* (ILC) that was held in Wittenberg (Germany) from 10-14 October 2016. The topic of the conference was: “Shaping Confessional Lutheranism for the 21st Century: *The Impact of the Lutheran Reformation on Mission, Worship, and Worldview.*”

The next ILC meeting is scheduled one week after the Synodical Convention from 24-29 September 2018 in Antwerpen, Belgium, on the topic *Ecclesiology and Ecumenism.*

25. Conclusion

Due to the Reformation celebrations in 2017, the past two years were filled with many meetings and celebrations. The FELSISA also celebrated its 125th Anniversary on 8 October 2017 during the Choir Festival that was held at the German School in Pretoria and hosted by the *St. Paul’s Evangelical Lutheran Congregation.* At the same time the FELSISA had a rotation of pastors. We look forward to a hopefully more settled time in the years that lie ahead where we can focus more on reaching the people in our communities with the Gospel of Christ as a Synod that is indeed TRUSTING, WELCOMING and CARING. We thank God for all who work so tirelessly in the church. May God bless you all richly.

Respectfully submitted by Bishop Dr. Dieter Reinstorf
And approved by the Synodical Council on 23 July 2018.