



## What are we learning from Covid for the future of our church?

*A reflection by Pastors of the  
EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN SOUTHERN AFRICA- CAPE CHURCH,  
Endorsed by the Synod of ELCSA (CC) on 30 October 2021*

### **Covid has taught us...**

- to be able to adapt, re-think and re-imagine.
- to find new ways to be church with the people and to reach them in their situation.
- new ways of doing worship and fellowship.
- to form new, meaningful habits (e.g., daily prayer/devotions via WhatsApp).
- to rethink the whole concept of big church buildings and big gatherings (and maybe move again towards smaller house-type church services and structures).
- we can be more flexible and adjustable than we ever thought before and are able to make decisions much faster than we normally do in church.
- to embrace and enhance our electronic communication (and to make better use of digital opportunities in our ministries).
- that through social media we can reach more people than we would normally.
- that Holy Communion at home is possible.

### **Covid has opened and is opening our eyes to the following:**

#### **Societal (collective) trauma is real.**

- There is a long list of traumatic experiences: immense loss and resulting grief, fear and even anger, insecurity and vulnerability, loneliness, etc.
- Loneliness and depression due to social distancing, not meeting regularly and fewer opportunities to engage with others.
- Effective pastoral care will become even more important to the church's ministry.
- People need support and to be connected to a community/network that provides stability.
- We have to work on creating a sense of belonging and understanding.

- We have to find new ways of caring (via phone or other platforms).
- We have to visit each other. Especially the elderly and sick should no longer be isolated.
- We need to be able to touch and hug each other, especially at funerals and in times of distress.

### **Relationships/communion are vital.**

- There is a need for belonging, for intimacy, for meaningful communion – without fear or social distancing.
- Regular in person meetings are necessary. As church we need to sing, celebrate, worship, share meals and connect with one another.
- The church must work hard to provide genuine communion, connectedness, safe spaces – and this also across borders between races, cultures, classes, generations, language groups, etc. This also implies working towards real reconciliation in our communities.
- The mask has become something to hide behind, with the result that people become more brutal and less compassionate in what and how they communicate. In time we hope to put away the masks, so that we can understand people talking, read facial expressions and not hide behind them.
- We need to move away from a self-centred church with a club-house mentality to a more open and ecumenical church.

### **Community involvement is even more urgent than before.**

- The church must become more involved in community projects and diaconal service: emergency relief, community development, prophetic (public) witness, ecumenical cooperation, etc.
- However, we observe that members have not shown much interest in helping the community.
- Many – especially young people – are even less visible in church than before. Faith is becoming more and more “private” and less outward-looking. There seems to be “indifferentism” which has made us nearly incapable of compassion that goes beyond our own circles.
- Our focus cannot only be on our own communities; we must look beyond and promote an outreach heart in our congregations.

### **Life is vulnerable.**

- Covid has shown us how vulnerable life itself is, our environment, ecological crises, dwindling resources.
- We need to live with much more responsibility, sharing living space with others and with coming generations. This also entails mindful living, living with respect and in wonderment about life itself. This should be a deliberate part of the church’s message.
- The church must be part of establishing a new, sustainable economy, with meaningful jobs being created and poverty alleviated. Greater equality/access to opportunities in many areas of life is urgently needed.
- We must assist in working towards a recovery of the damages done to our living environment, ecological awareness, less greed, more responsible living.
- We must return to a simpler life, with less consumerism and materialism.

- We must be part of building a more just, peaceful South Africa, with criminal and violent activities diminishing.

### **The church's voice must be heard**

- A discourse on God and God's role in this new world (and specifically the world of the pandemic) has mostly been absent from the current public discourses. The role of science and politics, the questions about economy and natural resources, even wild conspiracy theories and post truth reasoning have dominated the discourse on public forums. It silenced the voice of the church. And too often the bizarre responses of some churches/church leaders added to the church's voice not being taken seriously.
- We will have to work very hard to speak openly and in a credible way about God in this modern, changing world. We have to engage in the public discourse with much more credibility.

### **Digitalisation has its benefits, but also limitations, challenges and even threats.**

- Observed challenges/threats: No real feedback is given. Despite all the online offers, many yearned for the fellowship at church, as digital services do not provide the same community feeling as we would like. People may now get even more used to the idea of not going to church.
- Virtual sacrament celebration not ideal.
- We need a place to encounter God. Digitalisation makes us lose a 'locale' where God has promised to meet with us in a special way.
- In conflict situations people shy away from face-to-face meetings and prefer virtual meetings.

### **Going "back to normal"?**

#### **NO!**

- Covid has highlighted the flaws of what we thought was normal.
- The "Normal" we had before was not good. There are many serious defects of our "normal" civilization that have been made visible by this crisis.
- We hope that we will be able to learn the lessons of Covid and do something about the fault lines in our societies that have been exposed by Covid.
- Societal injustice, the great divide between rich and poor, gender-based violence including patriarchy, unbridled consumerism, individualism and egocentrism, ecological deprivation is the "normal" we do NOT want to return to.

### **Instead, what do we want the "NEW NORMAL" to look like?**

**Let us re-imagine the church's role and calling.**

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