

The Future of the Northelbian Church and our Communion as Churches

LETTER OF THE NEC-PARTNERS TO ALL MEMBERS OF THE NORTHELBIAN CHURCH

Final version

Breklum June 23, 2005

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

We greet you with a Bible Verse from Galatians 6:2 which says:

“Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ”

We have been invited by you to come and visit you as our partners and co-believers in Jesus Christ. We were 29 representatives from partner churches in Eastern and Western Europe, in the South and in the East, representing the worldwide fellowship of Christian Churches. We would first of all like to thank you greatly for giving us the privilege of being your honoured guests representing all your partner Churches from all over the world. We stayed amongst you between 12th and 26th of June 2005 participating in different activities which were organised by Northelbian Evangelical Lutheran Church, e.g., worshipping with you, visiting different congregations and institutions, etc. so as to contribute our views on the ongoing reform process of the Northelbian Evangelical Church. This has been possible because you value our long standing tradition of partnership.

We want to assure you that we also value our continued partnership and are very thankful that you started the work of mission in some of our respective areas. Along all these years, we have experienced the NEC as a reliable partner who is ready to work with us even in difficult situations.

We also experienced a strong feeling that our community has grown during these days as a deep spiritual fellowship has developed through sharing in prayer, in singing, in dancing, in worship and in praise both between the leaders of our respective churches and also members of ordinary congregations.

After having talked with you and listened to you, we feel challenged to highlight some aspects that attracted our attention during our visitation:

We have noticed that people are, on one hand, happy to have their children baptized and confirmed, and to ask for the blessing of marriages and the performance of Christian funerals. But on the other hand we miss their deeper sense of belonging to the church and commitment to the Gospel. This seems to be somewhat contradictory to us. We are therefore inclined to think that this is the result of the lack of a deeper understanding of what Christian spiritual life really is. We are afraid that the process of restructuring the Northelbian Evangelical Lutheran Church might fail unless it is accompanied by a process of renewing spiritual life.

We think also that a better integration is needed between church life and social services in the diaconical institutions, so that the identity of the Christian Church can be more clearly manifested. Here we underline our feelings that words and deeds should go together, so as to make Christian witness visible and communicable both inside and outside the Church.

We would like to urge all the members of the Northelbian Evangelical Lutheran Church to participate fully in the restructuring process encouraging you to say or speak out what you think should be changed and what should be retained. We think that this is a God given opportunity to make more than only structural changes in the Church. All members of the Church should feel empowered in living out their Christian faith in order to strengthen the visibility and Christian identity of the Church.

It is vital for the future of the Northelbian Evangelical Lutheran Church that the participation of youth in worship, in services, local parish life and decision making bodies is taken more seriously and is deliberately encouraged.

We strongly support that the Church comes up with a consolidated mission statement explaining clearly the basic purpose of Christian mission and a vision for the future of the Church. All the members should know what the Church stands for.

We also affirm that gender mainstreaming remains an important concern on the agenda of the Northelbian Evangelical Lutheran Church.

We are encouraged to offer these recommendations because we feel that we are one body in Christ. And if one part of the body is weak than the whole Church suffers and if one part of the body is strong the whole Body of Christ is strong and thus rejoicing. Therefore we share these recommendations in a spirit of common solidarity and affirmation of the interdependence of our Churches, not only in financial, but also in spiritual terms.

In the attached paper (*Report and Recommendations of the Partner Church Consultation of Breklum*) we have gathered in a more systematic way the results of our ecumenical visitation programme bringing together observations, questions and recommendations, which we would like to share with you. We do this, sisters and brothers, knowing that we in our home churches face challenges in the same way you are finding yourself in now knowing that all churches in themselves fall short of the full truth of the Gospel unless they open themselves up to new opportunities which the Holy Spirit may reveal and demand from us. In this sense let the Holy Spirit inspire the ongoing process of renewal and structural reform of the Northelbian Evangelical Lutheran Church!

We would like to finish this letter with a bible verse from Ephesians 4:15-16 which invites us

“... to grow up in all things to Christ, who is the head; from whom the whole body fitly joined together may grow and build itself up through love.”

May God bless you all

Names of all international participants including countries!

REPORT OF THE CONSULTATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO ALL CONGREGATIONS AND INSTITUTIONS OF THE NORTHELBIAN CHURCH

In looking back to the exposure visits in all of the three districts of the Northelbian Church and the international partner-church consultation in Breklum we would like to share the following impressions, theological suggestions and practical recommendations which were explored together with Northelbian participants in this shared process:

1) What we found significant in the Northelbian Church and its present social context

During the exposure week we met various congregations and institutions of the NEC. We were very much impressed by the variety of ways in which they were reaching out to different target groups. Church music in many sectors plays an important role in reaching out to people and communicating christian faith.

We found a generous openness towards people from different backgrounds and faiths. Interfaith dialogue is taken very seriously.

The Church is active in helping people to face the challenges of economic changes and rising unemployment in the society. There are many forms of suffering in German society: violence, illness, loneliness, family problems and particularly rising unemployment. Globalization has really reached the first world. The church is struggling seriously with postmodernism and secularization. At the same time there is an increased sense of religious longing and search in german society.

We found significant in the Northelbian Church and in its present social context the importance and value of diaconical work helping people in their physical, spiritual and psychological needs. We valued the professionalism and commitment of the people involved in the special ministries.

At the same time we felt a strong sense of individualism in society as a whole which was reflected also in the Church and sometimes resulted in parishes and special ministries

working in isolation from each other.

There is a great concern about gender issues and these are well integrated into all areas of church life.

There is a readiness to face reform even if it is painful.

2) What we strongly support in the Northelbian Church

We were impressed that the Northelbian Church makes great efforts to offer a presence in all areas of public life.

We support the work of parishes with kindergartens, scout groups and confirmation classes in order to bring young people into contact with Christian values.

We noted that the Church finds it important to maintain places and church buildings with historical significance, which give testimony to the faith of Christ in former times.

We affirm that the NEC is experienced as a reliable partner in many partnership links across the world. Ecumenical partnership work also contributes to missionary renewal in Action on issues such as HIV-AIDS strengthens associated campaigns in partner countries.

We affirm the value and importance of the specialised ministries working on contemporary issues.

3) What was difficult to understand and what concerned us

Although we found much that was good and positive in the life and work of the Northelbian Church, there were some matters that either surprised or concerned us.

In particular, issues of spirituality gave us cause for some disquiet. Questions concerning mission in the Church provided another focus of concern.

It is widely accepted that the Church is going through a financial crisis. The first response to this is to look for structural solutions - saving money by amalgamating districts and parishes, downsizing areas of the diaconical work. We wonder whether the problem is not in reality a financial or structural matter, but rather a problem of spirituality. We suggest it may not be possible to solve spiritual problems through bureaucratic measures. What is needed is not an ever more finely tuned restructuring process but rather a work of spiritual renewal.

There seems to be a lack of confidence about the present faith and future direction to be taken by the Church. Even active members of the Church sometimes seem reluctant to talk about and share their faith with others. Does this reflect a lack of self-confidence about the nature

of our faith itself?

Worship, although carefully conceived, often seems to lack any mention of repentance: without repentance, there can be no reaffirmation in the faith. Beautiful music, beautiful buildings, beautiful artwork and well crafted words cannot by themselves create spirituality. There must be a element of contrition for the Holy Spirit to gain an entry to our souls.

Mission and evangelism is another problematic area for the Northelbian Church. The Church still thinks and acts as if it were the church of the majority. It cannot be effective in mission in its own neighbourhood until it can see itself as a minority church. The Church needs to think clearly about its concept of membership and about whom its various engines of outreach are aimed at - those wholly outside the Church, those nominally its members through their payment of church tax, or those who are already its active membership but may still be in need of further encouragement or training.

And yet, we do not have to take all the burden of mission and evangelism on ourselves, because our calling as Christians is always to participate in God's mission rather than to have to undertake the whole task ourselves.

In some areas of church life, particularly in churches of Hamburg, the existence of the Northelbian Church seemed to be a well kept secret. The brand 'Northelbian' is not as well established or accepted as might be the case.

Although the diaconical work or special ministries of the church are a particular strength of its life and work, we were concerned that this work was not well linked with or integrated into the life of the parishes.

4) What we recommend for the future of the Northelbian Church and its reform process

There were a number of both general and more specific recommendations both from the exposure visits in the Northelbian church districts as well as from group work during the joint partner-church consultation in Breklum which we would like to share in a spirit of encouragement, solidarity and hope with parishes, districts and institutional bodies within the Northelbian Lutheran Church:

a) recommendations concerning the Northelbian Church as a whole

- many churches have positive experiences with developing a mission statement for the church as a whole, an affirmation of what the church stands for in its present context. We would recommend that the Northelbian Evangelical Church engages in a long-term process to develop a new vision of mission, re-evangelization and spiritual renewal in both the metropolitan and rural contexts: A well-formulated mission statement alone will not do it, but what is needed is a process for holistic missionary renewal. At the same time we know that becoming a mission-minded church takes time and is not a fast process

- following the examples of other churches (like the IECLB) we propose that the NEC should adopt a leading motto/slogan for a period of 2-3 years which unites parishes and specialized ministries, gives a sharper profile for the church in public and communicates more clearly an essential Gospel imperative in our given historical situation and could well serve as an appropriate way for strengthening the missionary potential of the NEC;
- observing that the NEC is a protestant church which has become closely integrated in western culture and the patterns of a consumer and entertainment society a renewed appreciation of the otherness, the spiritual and the sacramental nature of the church seems to be needed. The church is not just a social institution, it is more than just another employer in the realm of social service institutions. Together, people and pastors need to discover a new understanding of the holiness of the church in the Northelbian context?
- At the same time we believe that it should be a priority concern for the NEC to remain a public church - that means being recognizable as a christian church or congregations in public to overcome any apparent reluctance to stand for what christian faith means for us

b) recommendations concerning a vision for the NEC in future

- Every church needs a vision if it is to move on towards the future. A vision for the church and its work should be biblically inspired; should be shared by its members; should answer the contemporary religious aspirations and needs of people; should be communicative and relevant for the general public and society as a whole; should lead to acts of commitment and concrete actions shared across the church
- facing the dramatic historic experience of a steady decline in membership and a syndrom of constant contraction/diminishing a fresh vision or dream of the church is needed which could inspire new enthusiasm and a renewed commitment to spiritual growth in the NEC. It is important therefore to formulate a process by which many members and segments of church life would gradually develop a new vision together. The need to generate a common vision is a vision in itself
- among the elements which could inform a new vision of the NEC the following dimensions could prove helpful
 - * the church is a house open for all and for many believers in different forms, a house with open windows and many flats to live in a house with a common room in which to share different kinds of christian faith experiences
 - * the NEC is a praying and a healing church in today's context of fragmented and wounded relations
 - * the church is a listening and an attentive body for discerning the spiritual needs of people
 - * the church is a community which can become more spiritually self-confident in christian faith, a church with a strengthened identity and sense of mutual belonging, a church with a renewed sense of discipleship and sense of vocation
 - * the church is a church with a spirit of burning expectancy, a church attentive to the presence of the Holy Spirit

- * the church is entrusted with the promise of growth in the knowledge and experience of God, so that it can become a more spiritual church
- * the church is different in its life-style in the very way of being a community of both men and women, old and young, rich and poor; ordained and lay, a church which offers an alternative experience (of creative difference) to the cultural values in western-consumerist and highly individualistic society

c) recommendations concerning spiritual renewal in the NEC

- It was widely felt that in the Northelbian church a deepened understanding of spiritual renewal and spiritual growth in its own context would be needed.
- We therefore recommend that the NEC gives a fresh emphasis to spirituality. This concerns all levels of the church (leadership, districts, congregations, employeres, specialized ministries, theological and pedagogical training institutions
- As a way of implementing this we propose as concrete steps the development of a campaign to promote “spiritual alphabetization’ in the NEC which includes praying, reading the Bible, mourning, praising, healing, conscientious shopping and banking, meditation, silence, penitence, pilgrimage, dancing, saying grace at meals, biblical reflection, and attending church services – and all of this in a gender-sensitive way
- It could also help to make more visible and accessible the existing resources for spiritual experiences and deepening of spirituality within the NEC, together with the lutheran communion and our ecumenical partners
- This could also involve inviting ecumenical partners to accompany the NEC along its spiritual pilgrimage in a common learning process. As a first step the NEC could set up a special spirituality task force which should look into the implementation of these proposals
- Following the highlighting of Christian healing in both the last LWF assembly in Winnipeg and also the last world mission conference in Athens we also affirmed the value of ministries of healing as a source of renewal for the Church as a whole. The deliberate encouragement of ministries of healing in each local congregation (laying on of hands, prayer for the sick, anointing, ministry to those close to death) could strengthen its spiritual life and missionary witness.

d) recommendations concerning the community of women and men in the church

- in the women’s consultation group we affirmed that our vision of the Church is that we are a Community of Equals. The gender issue therefore must be a concern of the church leaders as well as the Church as a whole. A gender policy should be developed in each of our churches. Women and men should both take part in gender training programmes.
- We therefore recommend that the NEC revises its constitution to ensure 50% women’s representation at all levels with a special focus on leading positions and decision-making bodies;

- Clarity on the concept of gender is required. Focus should be given to gender training starting with individuals, theological students, bishops, synodical chairpersons etc.;
- We request the NEC to keep gender mainstreaming on its agenda. Also in the ecumenical partnership relations the NEC and NMZ should focus clearly on gender mainstreaming in project proposals and make it a condition for the allocation of funds;
- We insist that gender desks must comprise male and female staff members without replacing existing women's desks.

e) recommendations concerning the ongoing reform process

- there seems to be an urgent need for looking more deeply into the issues of church membership, patterns of belonging and ways of strengthening active participation in church life in the NEC. The church should also ask more specifically what are the spiritual needs of people who do not attend church
- we recommend also that the purpose of the whole reform process is made more clear and should be communicated in better ways both to local parishes and to the general public
- clear warning signals were seen not to regard institutional mergers as an instrument which will automatically lead to church and spiritual renewal. Merger needs a vision and must be embedded in strategic planning with perspective. Merger can be good in some cases but we must take the people with us. Merging as an instrument to save money can be wonderful, for administration professional services for example, but a merger is never the answer to a problem in the long run. It is only a short term answer. Merger is not an answer to the renewal of church
- we also asked ourselves where repentance is to be found both in the Church in general and in its worship. Without repentance there is no renewal.

f) recommendations concerning local parishes and church districts

- we recommend that efforts be strengthened to make the NEC a “welcoming church”, where everybody matters and is encouraged to contribute according to their gifts;
- we encourage that people should strive for an authentic vivid life of christian faith experiencing different kinds of worship where God may be encountered – each must begin with herself/himself;
- in the light of a continuing decline in the knowledge and practise of the traditions and basics of the christian faith we recommend the promotion of learning opportunities so that people may learn to know, live and express their faith. The pastoral and lay leadership training programmes should focus on outreach at the heart of all of their activities;
- we recommend the establishment of a permanent committee of the church council for ‘membership and parish development’ and strengthening support for institutions which enable christians and congregations to develop renewal and outreach;

- local parishes and church districts should explore what it means to equip local parishes with appropriate and adequate resources for their mission and witness
- they should explore further the relation of men and women in the different church ministries and the church as a whole
- all efforts should be taken to continue and to sustain special ministries, even in times of shrinking resources and more deliberately to create viable links between parishes and special ministries
- attempts should be made to make the integration of the church and its social services more visible
- we need to nurture an attitude in the parishes and in the church as a whole which says to its members: we need you and you have a place inside your church. Parishes should use all talents, gifts, skills and resources around them and maximize their effectiveness
- in facing the obvious lack of a feeling of belonging both to the church and between Christian congregations, we recommend that ways be explored to strengthening the sense of belongingness
- we also recommend that each parish should have a working group on local missionary challenges – a group which should include both ordinary church members and pastors as well as those looking into the church from outside
- we also offer for your consideration whether in hiring paid workers in church services and institutions their activity as committed church members should be taken into account

g) recommendations concerning the financial contribution system

- it is vital for the future of the church to develop new and complementary ways of increasing self-sustainability through imaginative new ways and developing complementary ways of financing
- in order to create an alternative and complementing way of collecting money for sustaining church work and church related services, it is vital to build upon a renewed sense of active participation and belonging to the church
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h) recommendations concerning the future of our communion as churches

- the concept of ecumenical partnership relations within NEWC should be broadened so as to also include churches from beyond the immediate borders, particularly the Danish and other Scandinavian churches which have much in common in their lives with the situation in the NEC
- the bilateral Lutheran relationships between partner churches should be seen and developed as part of the global multilateral ecumenical movement. This should enable the NEC also to be open to partnerships with other denominations and confessions.
- it is worth exploring whether the introduction of one regular Ecumenical Partnership Sunday in the church year to be celebrated by all local parishes in all NEC partner churches could become a valuable means of deepening our sense of belonging together as a communion as churches: As an alternative (if this is not feasible) it was also recommended to increase the regular use of

partnership-Sunday liturgies within existing direct partnership links on the district or parish level

- the importance of common prayer and mutual intercession was underlined. The Church should deliberately nurture and deepen a culture of mutual intercession and prayer by increasing the exchange of intercessory prayers and prayer concerns between the various partner churches
- it could also be explored whether a joint motto to be used for a given period by several partner churches could be developed to serve as a means for deepening mutual commitment and leading to joint activities
- it was also recommended that a common understanding should be developed to facilitate the ecumenical sharing of personnel (in both directions) as a vital component in our mutual participation in God's mission in the global context today; always the variety of direct partnership links between parishes and congregations and the role of the sending of (short-term or long-term) ecumenical co-workers/missionaries as bridge builders. The continuation of the sending of missionaries/ecumenical co-workers as visible face of the existing ecumenical communion should not be underestimated

i) recommendations concerning the follow up of the international partner church consultation

- we would appreciate the publication and distribution of the suggestions and the documents of the international partner-church consultation as soon as possible
- we also agreed that we would receive an interim feed-back report on the impact and consequences of this partner-consultation within an appropriate period
- we together commit ourselves to continue our common spiritual fellowship, mutual ecumenical learning process and our prayers for one another.

5) Concluding remarks

In conclusion, sisters and brother, partners in the world-wide Body of Christ, we see much that is good in your Church and great cause for hope for your future growth both in numbers and in the depth of your faith. We trust that we may grow together in our partnership in Christ and assure you that you will always live in our prayers and in our hearts!