

**Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malaysia**  
**Bishop's Address**  
**57<sup>th</sup> Triennial Diocesan Assembly**  
**04<sup>th</sup> – 05<sup>th</sup> December 2020**  
**Lutheran Hall, Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur**

**Introduction**

1. Dear delegates, welcome to the 57<sup>th</sup> Triennial Diocesan Assembly and Advent greetings to all of you in the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End, Behold He is coming soon!
2. It is a great privilege to address this august assembly at a time when our world is going through uncertainty due to the impact of Covid-19 pandemic.
3. Since I took over the leadership of our beloved church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malaysia, on more than one occasions I've been asked one of these two questions, why our church is not growing and how do we respond to Covid-19?
4. Church growth & Covid-19 are relevant questions, but there are no simple or straightforward answers to that, however, I believe, as a church we can learn from Nehemiah, from his experience on how to respond in a time of crisis and at the same time ensure the growth of ELCM.

**Reflection**

5. *“And I told them how the hand of my God had been favourable to me and also about the king's words which he had spoken to me. Then they said, “Let us arise and build.” So they put their hands to the good work.” (Nehemiah 2: 18)*
6. Nehemiah, an exiled Jew and a cupbearer to King Artaxerxes 1 of Persia, wept, mourned, fasted and prayed (Neh. 1: 4) because he was devastated by the news that was brought to him by Hanani. He learned about the destroyed walls of Jerusalem, burned gates and the distress and disgrace that his people are going through in Jerusalem (Neh. 1: 2-3).
7. God opened Nehemiah's heart to the tragedy that has befallen upon his people, *“We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses” (Neh. 1: 7)*. Nehemiah confessed his sins and that of his forefathers; he said “we” and not “they” or “them.” I would say that there was a sense of corporate responsibility.
8. He identified with the sins of his people and pleaded like an advocate for his people for he knew who God is; he recognised God's authority (Neh. 1: 5) and His greatness over all

creation. We read in the Scriptures that all great men of God have pleaded to God on behalf of their people, e.g. Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah, Daniel and Paul, to name a few.

9. Confession of sins, prayer and fasting led Nehemiah to find favour before God and men (Neh 2: 4-9). At the appointed time, he expressed his concern to king Artaxerxes 1, who permitted him and supplied the resources necessary to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and even took care of Nehemiah's safe passage to Jerusalem.
10. Nehemiah motivated, organised, strategised and mobilised his fellow Jews to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem according to God's plan. God's hand was upon Nehemiah (Neh. 2: 17-18), but not without external and internal opposition and personal attacks, Nehemiah persevered to complete the burden that became a vision because God was at work.

### **Our Response - Nature of the problem**

11. Are we burdened for the growth of ELCM? Do we want to respond to the impact brought by Covid-19 upon our members? I would say that it is God, or more precisely God the Holy Spirit who has put these two questions as a burden in our hearts for us to respond as a petition, "*O Lord help us to grow as a church and respond to the impact of Covid-19.*"
12. If the above reflects our burden, and there is a desire to respond than we should go on our knees and confess our sins (and that of our forefathers too). We have failed to acknowledge God's greatness, authority, leadership & ownership because we were managing God's church based on our knowledge and understanding, which has led to both internal and external conflicts. Confession of sins should be our priority, here and now.
13. Confession of sins should accompany a time of prayer and fasting. Prayer and fasting will reveal God's plan, change our perspective and enlarge our vision, less time in futile discussion and arguments. We cannot decide on a strategy and then ask God to bless our plans, but we are to ask Him first (Proverbs 16: 9). God is at work since the beginning of time, since the creation of the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1: 1), God will be at work even after we are long gone.
14. Therefore, under such circumstances, let's begin the new year with a church-wide 40 days of prayer and fasting, from 1st January 2021 – 9th February 2021, under the theme "*Let Us Arise and Build,*" so that we will find favour before God and men. I will share the relevant details with our pastors.

### **Beyond 2020 – Our Corporate Responsibility**

15. Honestly, before the 5th Bishop's election in 2019, during prayer, this is what God the Holy Spirit has placed in my heart, to repent and confess our sins as a church. As I spent time in

confession, prayer and fasting, our good Lord revealed His vision for our church, “*Let Us Arise and Build*” (Neh 2: 18); and the mission is in these three areas - (i) Reconciliation, (ii) Rebuilding & (iii) Reaching-out.

16. Let me share the mission areas briefly if we are willing to adopt and adapt to the changes that will be demanded by the vision, (i) Reconciliation – Internal conflicts within our local churches has caused decline in membership, (ii) Rebuilding - Identify, Review & Revitalise our present auxiliary and Diakonia ministries, (iii) Reach Out - to the unchurched.
17. One person (Bishop or a pastor) or a group (Diocesan Council/Pastors’ Conference/Local Councils) cannot ensure the growth of our church or respond to the impact of Covid-19. There must be a sense of corporate ownership and responsibility, that this is our Vision & Mission because where there is an owned vision and mission, differences will be set aside.
18. We need to motivate one another, organise ourselves, strategise and mobilise God-given resources, but not without external and internal opposition and personal attacks. A few individuals are already contributing to these (internal & external conflict). Are we going to allow their hidden agenda (human in nature) to set the course of our church or we going to adhere to the voice of God who is calling us “*Let Us Arise and Build?*”
19. Through a recent survey by the Diocesan Youth Committee (DYC) for their webinar series on the impact of Covid-19, we were able to ascertain that our youth and young adults are facing financial difficulties, mental health issues and struggling spiritually to understand this new normal. As a church, we need to not only preach and teach but develop and implement a holistic support system for a sustainable future. Therefore the choices we make today as elected representatives will determine the future of ELCM.

## **Concluding Remarks**

20. God is at work – Allow me to reiterate, to be relevant, now, and beyond 2020, we as a church (ELCM) need to take bold steps of change in our attitude and activity (confession, prayer & fasting) to reconcile, rebuild and reach-out (3R). We cannot afford to ignore these realities within our church that has caused the decline of membership and the reason why we are yet to address the impact of Covid-19 upon our congregation members.
21. I am proposing that the Pastors’ Conference, scheduled to be held from 09<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> February 2021 to further deliberate on the Vision & Mission and draft a 6-year strategy (2021-2026), to be adopted by the Diocesan Assembly in the year 2021. This is to ensure that our Vision & Mission is owned by every stakeholder, both clergy and laity.

22. In conclusion, don't work for me, don't work against me, work together with me, "*Let Us Arise and Build.*"

23. May our good Lord continue to give us the wisdom, knowledge and understanding that we need and empower us through the power of the Holy Spirit to engage in our Father's business, Amen.

**Rt. Rev. Steven Lawrence**  
**Bishop**  
**Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malaysia**

**04<sup>th</sup> December 2020**