

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malaysia
Bishop's Address
59th Diocesan Assembly
11th - 12th November 2022
Lutheran Hall, Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur

Introduction

1. Dear delegates welcome to the 59th Diocesan Assembly. I greet you in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, and pray that the grace and mercy of God will overflow in all our lives.
2. We were able to congregate for corporate worship in 2022 as the government slowly lifted the restrictions of physical distancing and limited the number of worshippers to break the transmission of Covid-19. Children, the elderly and those with medical issues faced more restrictions than those who were young and healthy. All praise and glory be to God that we have returned to some form of “normality” in our congregations.
3. However, we continue to face internal and external challenges in our Church. As I said in 2021, we cannot allow our differences to deter the work of God. We must acknowledge that God is at work and put our differences aside to *Arise and Build* ELCM.

God's Mission – Reconciliation

4. Reconciliation is God's mission. “*But God demonstrates His love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us*” (Romans 5: 8). God went to great lengths to reconcile humanity, even sacrificing His own Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Reconciliation is God's initiative to restore the broken world to God's intentions by reconciling “to himself all things” through Christ (Colossians 1:19).
5. Reconciliation is core to our Christian faith. Author Philip Yancy wrote, “Christian faith is...basically about love and being loved, and reconciliation. These things are so important, they're foundational, and they can transform individuals, families.”
6. As recipients of His undeserved grace, it is now our responsibility to be ambassadors of God's mission of reconciliation in our families, congregations, and to the broken and wounded world, to simply put it, to our neighbours

Our Mission – Reconciliation

7. We are aware of the internal and external conflicts in ELCM, and as I said last year, "...conflict is a product of human relationships and an inevitable and integral part of human life." We cannot remain caught up in these conflicts as they will seriously impede God's mission of reconciliation. Our calling is to be ambassadors of God's mission of reconciliation.
8. How do we begin? We are to pray, discern, repent and critically re-examine ELCM's mission corporately. We must recognise and confess our sins individually and corporately, be willing to forgive and live in peace with one another, and acknowledge that reconciliation is a process. A process where we recognise and acknowledge the past and are willing to respond to God's mission of reconciliation as we move forward.
9. The Church has always been at the forefront of God's mission of reconciliation. We need to set an example. If we who believe in the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ don't set an example, then no one will. Church, the body of Christ, with its different and unique members is the sign of hope in our broken and wounded world.
10. We cannot allow past mistakes or wrongdoings to continue to traumatise the future of ELCM. As ambassadors of God's mission of reconciliation, we cannot live in denial or be passive bystanders. We need to play an active role and say, yes, I am my brother's keeper.
11. The Office of the Keys - The Lord Jesus breathed on His disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." (John 20:22–23). The Office of the Keys is that special authority which Christ has given to His church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent (Ref: Luther's Small Catechism).
12. Reconciliation is a sign of God's presence in the Church. We are reminded in Ephesians 6: 10-18, "*take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms...*" It is essential to recognise the role of the unseen dimension in our quest for reconciliation, and put on the full

armour of God to stand against the devil's schemes with all kinds of prayer. Proclaiming that reconciliation is the manifestation of God's power and victory, made visible in the cross of Christ.

Beyond 2022 - Our Responsibility

13. We need to acknowledge that reconciliation is not a one-time event. It is a long and costly process, and we may face challenges as we progress. But as ambassadors of reconciliation, we must be intentional in pursuing reconciliation.
14. Hope in the Cross of Christ will continue to fuel us as we meditate on Scripture, worship God and pray for the healing of others. We need to take responsibility to do our part, and God the Holy Spirit will help us to move forward.
15. Therefore, every infant step we take to be ambassadors of reconciliation matters to God. Through our attempt(s) of forgiving and seeking forgiveness, and as healing takes place, it is a great outcome and encouragement to reach out to others within the congregation.

Year of Reconciliation – 2023-2025

16. The Pastors & Church Workers Conference met from 24 – 26 May 2022 and discussed and drafted the 10-year strategy (Let us Arise and Build: 2022-2032). However, ongoing conflicts and unresolved matters require us to relook the strategy and prioritise reconciliation process.
17. I declare the years 2023 – 2025 as the Year of Reconciliation.
18. Pastors & Church Workers Conference will meet from 7 – 9 February 2023 to redraft our strategy based on our priority - reconciliation. A three-year strategy will be drafted and presented to the DC by the end of February 2023. The DC will forward the proposed strategy to all DA delegates. The three-year strategy will be part of ELCM's 10-year strategy (Let us Arise and Build: 2022-2032).

Concluding Remarks

19. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I took over the leadership of ELCM at a very challenging time and acknowledge that I am still trying to address the internal conflicts and unresolved matters within ELCM.

20. God through Christ, who called us as ambassadors of reconciliation is still faithful, and I believe He will take us through the storms and eventually, there will be calmness because Jesus Christ is in the boat with us.

21. In conclusion, I appeal and hope that we will continue to journey together through the rough seas and storms as the Lord Jesus Christ continues to guide each of us to serve Him faithfully as ambassadors of Reconciliation. Let us arise and build. Amen.

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

11th November 2022