



BISHOP'S ADDRESS

**Diocesan Assembly
Ancasa AllSuites Resort & SPA Port Dickson
11th – 13th September 2009**

Eight months ago I assumed the mantle as your Bishop. It was a rather unexpected calling. On the one hand, it was a personal challenge but on the other hand, it was God's calling to lead his flock with a determined purpose. I have served the ELCM for the last twenty-three years and I have never walked away from the Lord's calling. If God himself has called me, and called us, then we ought to adhere to his plan for us. We must only know that we must be bold witnesses of Christ Jesus to the world and submit to his love. In the process of making all the preparation for this first Address, I committed my spirit to the Lord for his guidance. The Lord has never let me down. I have put much thought in this Address, and although it is my word that you read, I pray it is the Holy Spirit who will speak to your heart. My Address is further envisioned and elucidated in the ELCM 5-Year Plan.

No other foundation ... than Jesus Christ himself

There can be no other foundation for a Church than Jesus Christ himself (1 Corinthians 3:11). He is our Lord, our God, and we worship him. Though he humbled himself to be born as man and walk the earth to be with us, and to die for us, he was not just man but God himself (John 1: 1). To live in relationship with him as his children, is our privilege and joy. Such privileges come with a responsibility! In Jesus Christ, we believe all divinity was present but humbled within his humanity. Hence, the spiritual paradigm of the Christian faith: in meditating upon the humanity of Jesus Christ, we come closest to the spirit of God himself. In Jesus, God made all things adequate for our salvation and our life. In Jesus, we have the Truth (John 14:6). In the Bible, we have the apostolic witness to that Truth. In our daily life and reason, we have access to that Truth. We fall to Jesus in our moments of darkness and rise to Jesus in our moments of triumphs. This is our Christian life! This is how our Christian life should be ... one of endeavours and triumphs.

Action Animated by our Faith

In the historical process that came to be the ELCM, God has not left us without a firm hand. For reasons not in our way to control, we are a church among other churches, a people of God among other people of God. Once we recognize what that means, we will know to whom we owe our responsibility to serve. As such it is of paramount importance that we should recognize that as the people of God, we are Malaysians first;

and secondly and largely, Indian! Since it is an aspect of humanity sanctioned by God for the present, we should then discover our mission here. We have to uphold the law and take our Malaysian citizenship seriously by participating in the social processes to create a just society. Yet at the same time, we should build bridges to the culture we have inherited from our forefathers. If we should engage our society in this manner, inspired by our faith in Jesus Christ, our action animated by our faith, we will shine like a lamp set on a hill (Matthew 5: 16). This is the basis for mission that cannot be hidden from the world. The silent witness to Christ in our action in society will be loud and clear.

One Single Factor: Change!

Silent or loud, our witness in this world is built on one single factor: change! It is said that “in a changing world, those who stand still will be left behind.” Only the gospel is unchanging, the witness of the gospel to this world must change and take into account changing technology, changing politics, changing economics and changing social factors. We believe in a church that should grow and growth is change. All growth is about change. For example, the flower becomes a fruit, the fruit ripens, and the ripen fruit then sheds its seeds. The Lord God decreed that in order to grow we must change. But unlike animals and plants, God has given humanity the power to relish triumph. He has given us the power to strive. Oftentimes, it is difficult to move out of our comfort zone. Yes, we feel that our life is too short to afford any destabilizing change. Yet, I believe we can move beyond “preaching change” to sponsoring and encouraging change in new ways and stimulating ways. ELCM in order to grow must experience change. We need to look at new ways to embrace the people around us who are already in our courtyard. We must look for ways to inspire the society around us with an idealism, albeit Christian idealism, and motivate them towards change and triumph in a world that is becoming ever complicated. Perhaps a “Think-Tank” group in every congregation would be helpful to discuss on matters of interest with its members.

Strengthening and Expanding

Hence, my twofold diocesan objective that would strategize my tenure as the Bishop of ELCM, God willing, for the next decade is: STRENGTHENING and EXPANDING. Here I have outlined it as follows:

Strengthening: (a) Nurturing Spiritual Growth;
 (b) Self-Reliant Projects;
 (c) Clergy and Lay Leadership Training;
 (d) Building Bilateral Church Relations;
 (e) Capacity Building.

Expanding: (a) Building Membership;
 (b) Opening New Areas of Ministry;
 (c) Streamlining and Coordinating all Auxiliary Activities and Existing Programmes;

 (d) Increasing in Diakonia ministries;
 (e) Improving Revenue Sources.

Each of these areas reflects my deep concern within ELCM, and each of these goals (directives) has been worked out with 10 step-by-step targets subject to annual review at our Diocesan Assembly. While I have worked this out in detail in my ELCM 5-Year Plan in practical terms, this is what I mean by each of these areas and why I think it is an important part of our whole community of believers who have Jesus Christ walking ahead of us.

Nurturing Spiritual Growth: Love

Spiritual growth is both visible and invisible. It is built upon a simple human capacity for love and devotion. We show love for our family by doing things that are visible. We demonstrate our devotion to our friends in acts of friendship. It is to this very impulse that Jesus draws attention when he calls us, “to be with him” (Mark 3:14). We want to know about the person we love more, we spend time with the person, we do things for the person and with the person, we talk to them, we “pour out” ourselves to the ones we love. We are not afraid. We encourage and are encouraged. We do not brook envy; we

uphold and delight in the other person's achievements. That is what love does and it is one of the underlying foundations for spiritual growth (1 Corinthians 13).

We say "God is love" almost as if it is a formula, but the fact is that the experience of love is an experience of reaching out. God reaches out to the world. If we say we love the world and do not reach out for God, then we lie to ourselves. Love on the other hand is not something the ELCM can teach in a classroom but the ELCM must make room for the congregations and its members to reach out and enfold the world in loving compassion (Luke 10: 29 - 37)). We have the life-defining example in Christ. We celebrate him in our lives by that act of love, when we reach out and touch the lives of others.

Self-Reliant Projects: Dare to Dream

Our history is a gift from God. We often fail to see our own strength. For reasons beyond our own making we have inherited the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malaysia. We as the ELCM have engaged this society in a way, I dare say, as no other churches have and have been able to sustain it. In reality, it is partly due to the able and visionary leadership of the past, and in part due to the members who could foresee such a vision. We have a small membership of about 3,000 dedicated Lutherans, yet under our care grow the Bethany Home, Rumah Hope, Rumah Rapah, Rumah Chrestus, and Women's Hostel. Once we had the Agro Industrial Training Complex in Kuala Pilah which had gone defunct, and there was a time we even wanted to build a hospital! No church with a membership of 3,000 would dare to dream of such things. We must not stop and settle down in our success! We need to be proactive and continue this momentum by embracing this dream to be relevant in this society. We learn from our failures, and we must not give up the historical momentum but continue to build. We must plant and set into motion new projects, not for prestige or for someone to congratulate us but ones that will ultimately serve our community. We have needs in our community that needs urgent attention, we have benefactors who graciously lend a helping hand, we have a church that believes in open governance and financial faithfulness, all that is needed is a vision and the will. Our relevance in this society must be such that our joy should be the

joy of the community we serve. I urge you to dare dream of an ELCM that is vibrant, inspiring and engaging to all Malaysians.

In this respect, we have come a long way but we have an even longer distance to go. Some of our ministries in the past have closed down for various reasons. It is not a happy reminiscence but we must forge new work. We thank the Lord, for the new development in Taiping, a goat - cow Farm (a project to cater to the community by Rumah Rapah). God willing, we hope to build another vibrant and dynamic Bethany Home in Port Dickson for the southern region just like our Bethany Home in Simpang Ampat in Perak.

Clergy and Lay Leadership Training: Our Most Valuable Asset

The most valuable asset in any organization is its human resources. The people who run a successful organization are dedicated to the goals of the organization, diligent in their effort, make working in the organization a lifestyle choice, are capable of team work, and have a huge capacity to improve and learn. The church in many ways is like a secular organization only our goals differ. We believe in compassion, in protecting the weaker brethren, in turning to a source of power that is generated from our Lord Jesus Christ! But the organization is run by men and women capable of back-sliding and demotivated and lost in the mid-life crises of life. So I am convicted that we must have a secure policy of continually improving our clergy and all the promising individuals who show leadership qualities in our church governance. We must set targets on the number of people we want to train in any given period of time and in any given field. This process of empowerment is an investment that will take us into the next decade. We cannot afford to go down the path of destructive selfishness, inwardness, and eventually dissolution. That is not the way to glorify God in our lives.

Building Bilateral Church Relations: To Gather them to the Lord

While we are used to use the term "church" as "main-line churches" defined by doctrines and historical lineage, the "*ekklesia*" that Paul talks about is much larger. The first so called churches were in fact defined not by doctrines but by culture. The Greeks and Jews had different customs that made it difficult for the Christians to co-exist under

one roof or management. If we look beyond our own blinkers, we can see that there are many congregations, the micro-denominations, who are culturally akin to us. They may be “theologically imperfect!” but in the last twenty years I have seen practising Christians outside the borders of “traditional churches” seeking a caring working relationship. Although we in the ELCM are rooted deeply in our own traditions, we have successfully made room for non-Lutherans to work with us. It is our responsibility to gather them to the Lord so that even non-Christians too may participate in our activities and grow with us and may so partake of the love that Jesus Christ has for them.

Building bilateral church relations with “the international communities” (overseas churches or institutions) is an area that needs to be fully explored and regulated in the ELCM. We need to continue in enhancing our ongoing partnership in some specialized areas of mission work with our friends in Mission Einewelt of Germany, United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany, Danmission, Church of Sweden, Lutheran Church of America Missouri Synod, Lutheran Church of Australia, Arcot Lutheran Church of India, and the Tamil Evangelical Lutheran Church of India. These bilateral church relations would further revitalize and enrich our spiritual life and vision with a broader perspective. Such partnerships would also make room for exchange programmes, higher theological education and trainings for our members and church workers. Our relationship with the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), Council of Churches of Malaysia (CCM), Christian Federation of Malaysia (CFM), Federation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in Malaysia and Singapore (FELCMS) and Seminari Theoloji Malaysia (STM) has always been good. As active members of these bodies, we will continue to build good will and strengthen our relationship.

Building Membership: Explains our Choice for Christ

The “Decade of Growth” has been on-going for the last nine years now, and the clarion call now is “Each One Reach One Each Year.” It all sounded good on paper but the growth statistics show that while the overall Christian number has increased in Malaysia between 1991 and 2000, due largely to East Malaysians, the scenario despite its projection into 2010 to 2020 is not going to be rosy. The growth rate of Indian Christians is lower than the natural growth rate of the Indian community by 4%! It indicates that

the Indian Christian population is losing two members daily to either apostasy or emigration. Short of calling, Christians are called to have larger families to counter this trend! Our own membership in the ELCM has dwindled over the last 3 years! I urge all congregations to plan and implement membership drive programmes and faithfully carry out their evangelistic activities. For this reason, it is my proposal that the annual membership census of ELCM be tabled and reported at every Diocesan Assembly. This would help us to see the total membership strength of ELCM and also review our performance!

“Each One Reach One Each Year” should mean for us firstly to cultivate a loving relationship with a non-Christian friend or a non-church going person. To be able to engage them in a non-judgmental way, show love that is not condemnatory, and be able to talk about life-relevant issues (such as death, grief, moral frailty, family, loss, meaning of life, diseases, worship, idolatry etc.) and explain our Christian choices. It simply means that every potential member is to bring “one” person to the Christian fold “each year.” This evangelistic campaign was launched by me in June 2009. The growth of membership in the congregations lies in the hands of the laity; the pastors are merely facilitators to this so-called “one plus one campaign!” Every potential member is called to “become fishers of men” (Mark 1: 17). A brochure is available to assist the person who wants to be involved in this membership drive for the ELCM.

Opening New Areas of Ministry: Targeted Work

There is never a shortage of opportunities for ministry. There are certain ministries that only the Diocesan Council could undertake; and there are certain ministries, congregations can undertake; and yet there are certain areas of ministries only individuals can undertake. The congregation by undertaking new areas of ministry also creates opportunity for individuals to blossom. This is a wonderful feature of a healthy church. There are many ways to identify a people-group or a need-group and define our missionary role in engaging them. Adopting families, drop-in centres for single-mothers, youth centres, reading rooms for children, kindergartens, feeding-programme, hostel-and-tuition centres: what we can do at the congregation level is quite a lot but there is a method to discover such needs, plan, budget and deploy our members. This is an area

we will develop and educate our members. In this aspect, we acknowledge the effort of Zion Lutheran Congregation for initiating their Sunday feeding programme in Brickfields. They are “in touch” with the public nearly every Sunday!

Streamlining and Coordinating all Auxiliary activities and Existing programmes: Think like a Management Team

Our auxiliary activities include: Sunday school, Women’s work, Junior Work, Young Adults, Senior Citizen, and Youth Work. The present areas of ministry within our church need to be strengthened. Our own work among children, youth and women are important for our own vitality because the whole of our leadership emerge from here. This ministry is from where our leaders are hatched. However, under the present system, the effectiveness of our programme has not been measured properly due to a lack of properly tabulated data. As part of our diocesan streamlining and coordinating exercises, this will be rectified and reported back to the relevant leaders so that we can all think like a management team! In this way, we can then assess to see how we can spend our limited resources more efficiently.

Diakonia: Women in Ministry

I have seen in the last few years that all growing denominations take “theological and ministry training” of women in their churches very seriously. There has been a traditional bias against women in ministry by looking at them as potential pastors or not! While we may not be ready for women’s ordination, there is ample room for women in the diaconal ministry. If they are not serving in full-time capacity, for whatever reasons, theologically trained women, even if it was a diploma level, make excellent servants of God in their local congregations, in their families, as potential leaders and participants in the decision making process and ministry of the church. In light of this, I have requested the assistance of Lutheran Church of America Missouri Synod to provide us the resource material and personnel for the training of our deaconesses. The Deaconess training programme was launched in August 2009.

Improving our Revenue Sources

Our ELCM have always stood on the edge of financial collapse, and it is a testimony of God’s grace that we even survived this long. The benchmark of our financial failure was

that we never received enough from church funds to pay our clergy. We had also depended on the revenues accrued from the management of our properties and the generosity of individuals who covered up the monthly short falls. The reason for our complicated financial situation are many but here are some solutions: Firstly, we need to forgive any past lapses for any suspicion of indiscretion is purely one of procedural and not one of personal profits. For those aggrieved by such as I who had assumed the seat of the Bishop, ask for forgiveness. Secondly, we need to develop a policy on the management of church property to guide us in future decision making that are more transparent. Thirdly, members have to improve their contribution so that the Diocesan commitment at least covers the salary of a pastor. We must remain faithful to our tithing. Otherwise, poorer congregations may have to settle for non-stipendiary pastors. Fourthly, church accounts should be open and timely sent to the Diocesan Office in order to build a culture of financial responsibility. Fifthly, congregations should model their projects profitably; after all, even the best of charity can be ruined if it is run at a loss. Sixthly, our local leadership should also become competent fund-raisers.

Conclusion

May God help us build his Kingdom! Let us, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Malaysia, leave our mark in history. Let Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour be glorified. May the Lord bless you and keep you always.

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