

EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN SOUTHERN AFRICA (NATAL-  
TRANSVAAL)

EVANGELISCH-LUTHERISCHE KIRCHE. IM SÖDLICHEN AFRIKA  
(NATAL-TRANSVAAL)

EVANGELIESE LLITHERESE KERK IN SUIDER-AFRIKA (NATAL-  
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The Chairperson

Truth and Reconciliation Commission

P.O. Box 1158

Johannesburg

2000

RE-SUBMISSION BY THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN  
SOUTHERN AFRICA (NATAL-TRANSVAAL) TO THE TRUTH AND  
RECONCILIATION COMMISSION

To whom it may concern!

The Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa  
(Natal-Transvaal) submits that:

We are aware that we have failed to live according to our own basic theological principle, i.e. our understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is the gift of His unconditional, forgiving and suffering acceptance. By accepting and enjoying the privileges of the apartheid era ourselves as members of the white society and failing to speak out sufficiently against the exploitation and suffering of the majority of the black community, we have hurt many people not only in their God-given dignity but also in their capability to cope with their daily lives, yes, by

doing so, we have betrayed and denied God's unconditional love of all people irrespective of race, class, culture, education, achievement, gender or creed.

We also realise that, in contrast to Martin Luther, the initiator of our tradition, we have failed as a church to speak out critically and boldly against overt public injustices and the abuse of power, such as the forced removal of communities from their traditional homes, job reservation, the denial of citizenship rights to blacks in the country of their birth, police brutality, the breakup of families due to race classifications, vast disparities in educational opportunities between blacks and whites or other policies which effected and hurt the human dignity.

We are not aware of any "gross human rights violations" committed by the church according to the definition of the Act of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, though some individual members may fall into this category, we are, however, aware that both as church and as individual members, we were deeply implicated in the injustices of the apartheid era as a whole and wish to put our acknowledgement and sincere regret of this fact on record. /pp1-2/

As Church Council of the above church, we want to reiterate our document of, 1986, in which we emphasized the church's public responsibility in the South African situation. We then addressed our congregations, our church partners here and overseas and the government in the document: "A word of hope in the present situation in South Africa" (May 1986) and in the document of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa, including our own, "Christ is our Hope" (September 1986). (Copies attached.)

Here we stated our regret for not having listened to the voice of our black brothers and sisters and came to the conclusion that apartheid had to be abolished. At the same time we confess that we as Church Council did not sufficiently encourage our clergy to speak out boldly against the atrocities of the apartheid system and did not sufficiently support those that did.

As also stated in the above mentioned documents, also our community is embedded in the wider society of our country. Our place during the apartheid years was in the privileged white section of the South African population whose leaders governed the country and whose policies determined the lives of the black, voiceless majority. The interests, of our members were by and large identical with the interests of the white population, and our loyalty to the government of the day and other public institutions was hardly questioned.

Most of us were reluctant to expose and critique any aspect of government policy, often defended these policies, when they were questioned by others, and feared the repercussions if we would oppose or contradict them. Some of our members were involved in the development and execution of such policies. As preachers: and pastors we generally avoided such topics or addressed such issues only very

carefully, fearing the consequences of conflict with our congregations or public ostracism. We were the privileged and could afford to look away, to ignore. The others looked at us, cried out and begged for help mid support, they complained and accused and we answered with silence or retaliated with counter-accusations, trying to justify ourselves and the system. We are co-responsible for the many wounds, for the pain and the injustice.

Moreover, the majority of our members come from a German-Lutheran background which forms a small threatened minority even within the white population. To safeguard our particular cultural heritage and traditions, we tended to isolate ourselves from our black fellow Lutherans and from other Christians in general. Because of this, we were not as much exposed to the black social reality and black opinion as some of the churches who had both a black and white constituency. This made it easier for us to ignore, silently condone, or even deny the suffering which happened in our country.

We further lacked the will and courage to discern and expose the rationalisations with which all these measures were legitimized. As Christians we should have been independent and alert enough not to become victims of the manipulation of the truth in the name of an ideology based on collective selfinterest, race and ethnicity.

We also submit that after the recent changes, many of us are extremely concerned about the future of our country. It will take a considerable effort from everybody to come to terms with what is happening. Many of us feel that they have done their best under the circumstances, trying to help to bring about positive development and change. Others cannot see that what they had believed in at the time was wrong in principle, though they concede that regrettable, unjustifiable and terrible things developed out of something well intended and that terrible measures had to be taken to uphold the system.

A considerable number of our members, have become victims of violent attacks, robberies and murders. This has caused a deterioration in the attitude of many of our members towards the spirit of hope and optimism for the future of the new South Africa. Others fear the consequences of affirmative action as it leads to new discrimination and often to a deterioration of the quality of work as many new employees are not sufficiently prepared and trained for the new positions. Many see no future for their children. /pp2-3/

An atmosphere of anxiety, uncertainty, hopelessness and powerlessness leads some of our well trained and educated members to leave the country.

We realise that a giant task of "healing of memories" and gaining a spirit of courage and dedication to build a common future lies ahead of us and we almost despair of our capacity to remain positive and to tackle that task. We are convinced

that such a spirit can only emanate from faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ, whose redemption transcends all earthly shortcomings and obstacles and empowers and motivates the believers to continue with their task to witness to Christ's gospel of unconditional love in spite of all temptations, difficulties and obstacles.

We are aware that the change of government does not mean that injustice, corruption, crime, evil, violation of people's dignity and even the destruction of human life has come to an end. People will

continue to be hurt, cheated, their dignity and rights violated, because the new South Africa has not brought about sinless, unselfish people. All the more we as Christians, having, received God's unconditional love and acceptance through Christ, have the task to persevere and to continue to pass on this divine love and forgiveness unconditionally and to fight structures which unjustifiably hurt God's people created in his image.

We realise that this confession comes at a time when it is opportune and "politically correct" to denounce apartheid, that we should have spoken up when it was costly to do so, and that, in a sense this submission comes too late. However, we do not want to pretend that we had not been part of the reprehensible past of our country, acknowledge our involvement or lack of involvement, and ask for the forgiveness of God and of those who have become victims of that era.

We are at the moment struggling in our church as to how to deal with our individual past as well as our past in the country as a whole. After we had received the very first letter dated 10th January 1996 from the chairman of the TRC, Archbishop Tutu, calling upon all churches to pray for the TRC, all our congregations were approached to seek possibilities on all possible levels to share with one another the experiences about the past, (Letter attached) This could help to bring to the fore the truth and the deep hurt that we have mutually caused each other. This then could also lead to the confession of one's guilt to that specific person. Some of our pastors have attended a course on "healing of memories" which is intended to help and enable our members to learn how to listen and to speak and share with others, especially with those we have hurt. We hope that through this process many people may be freed through the truth they have shared with one another. All our members have also been called upon to involve themselves and to continue to involve themselves in programs and projects in their vicinity to rebuild and develop our country in all its facets for the sake of all citizens of our country.

We hope that we will receive strength through our faith in Christ to be able to face this challenge. May God bless South Africa and all its people!

Yours in Christ,

D.R. Lilje,

Bishop

On behalf of the Church Council of the

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (Natal - Transvaal)