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How Do We Get Out of the Corona Crisis and What Remains?

Markus Nietzke

This article was a Talk given on June 15th, 2021, at the Pastors Convention of the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK).

Before I venture into addressing the subject of the Pastors Convention, I would like to express my gratitude:

- a. During the Corona pandemic (and from a global perspective it is far from over) we are carried by the promise of the Lord Jesus Christ: “See, I am with you every day, until the end of the world!” This “every day” also includes all those days of which we say with Ecclesiastes 12:1, “I have no pleasure in them!” The glorious confidence that Jesus Christ gives us through His Word sustains you and me in days that we deem as having almost no pleasure. Praise and thanks be to God!
- b. Another word of thanks goes to our congregation members who have, with cordial solidarity and faithful intercession, brought us before God in prayers on our behalf in all tasks and areas of responsibility in these trying times.
- c. And a thank you must also be said for all collegiality experienced in the church, the church districts, and among our colleagues. This included, the spontaneous greeting by email, the surprise phone call, the collegial conversation via Zoom, the one-on-one exchanges, the unexpected gift by mail and others. We have not yet seen the end of the pandemic; but speaking on the topic “What remains?” this must be said above all else: Thankfulness remains!

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Rev. Markus Nietzke has served as Superintendent of the Lower-Saxony West church district of the SELK since 2018. Pastor Nietzke has worked as an educator and missionary since 1994 and has founded and co-founded churches and Lutheran schools in Germany. He has held teaching positions at the Lutheran Theological College at Oberursel at the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Pretoria-Tshwane and at the Lutheran Institute in Southeast Asia in Bangkok, Thailand. Pastor Nietzke writes essays, reviews, sermons, devotions and other resources for a variety of publications.

In my talk, I'd like to focus on ways out of the pandemic —thinking ahead into a “new” normality. I am not one of those who would like to go back to the past or “keep going on” as before. I am offering some reflections in the hope of encouraging further collegial discussions. The ideas are provisional in nature and certainly also to be regarded as incomplete. My approach is this: I'll describe something and then ask the question, “What remains?” followed by a statement. Overall, what I have to say has probably been said many times before. So let us start with “What remains?” The need to pay attention to God's work through the Holy Spirit in His Word and to have circumspect discussions with one another, with ample time for the exchange and understanding of our various positions.

On the 12th of March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the spread of the Coronavirus to be a pandemic. In our indispensable contemporaneity with the society surrounding the church, this has a considerable effect on church life. However, the supposition in dealing with the pandemic is that the SELK and its congregations are affected by the pandemic to very different degrees. The drastic restrictions on church life and social contacts, up to and including the closure of church buildings due to measures taken by the government, were experienced by many as traumatizing. Let us not avoid conversations about exactly “what the virus did to us.” Calling things by their names helps; it may be helpful to differentiate clearly between aspiration and reality. All the quite opposite expectations must be sorted and processed afterwards - spiritually, of course, as well as collegially. An initial answer to the question at hand is therefore: We learn anew to differentiate between theological expectations and experienced reality. What remains after the pandemic? Claims and expectations? Or do we, as a church, develop the ambition to set out into unexplored spiritual territory? Let us adopt and embrace the prayer of the church during all times of pandemic, catastrophes, wars, as well as sunny, peaceful days and hours, and pray: “Lord, renew your church and begin with me!”

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As a church, we have been given an abundance of creative ideas. I don't think one can move forward without giving thanks. Thank you for your service in all faithfulness and taking into consideration the most diverse talents and all diversity in the unity given to us by Christ, for the cooperation and opportunities to experience and live faith.

Concerning the diversity in unity, I want to mention a few examples in our church that do not claim to be complete but demonstrate a tireless – daily (sic!) commitment, in the period from April to May 2020:

- a. Home devotions and home worship services in a variety of media, for instance handing out our written sermons as well as devotional calendars, or delivering these via MP3, video, Zoom, or Skype
- b. Telephone devotions and call-in telephone church services, even with church coffee via phone
- c. “*Blütenlese-Gottesdienst*” [“florilegium (composite) worship services”, i.e., with several worship leaders and churches interacting] to produce a digital offering by one of our districts for the present, as well as the foreseeable future
- d. Various divine service formats in an abbreviated form wherever there was an opportunity to celebrate in public
- e. Family and children's services via digital media
- f. Live-stream church services
- g. Zoom worship service with participants from the local church district and beyond
- h. Instagram posts with short devotions, thoughts for the day, and prayers.

Given that religious freedom to hold public worship services and the so-called “basic rights” of the church [a special reserved legal right for churches in Germany] are in my opinion very high and, indeed, very precious, the question is, however: How do we remain sensitive to our surroundings and to the possible existential fears of some of our own community members?

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We have become aware again of the importance of encounters and worship on site, especially where our church members live widely scattered in the diaspora and celebrate divine services in one town and place on certain Sundays and experience fellowship. (I want to stress it a bit: The role of church coffee! and sharing meals and eating together!). We are a church in the diaspora. Let's face it, fellowship is a necessity for our church life and our church's existence!

In this context, I would like to let the signs of experienced pastoral care during the pandemic shine again. In addition to the church's printed newsletter and newsletters via email, SMS, or WhatsApp, even old-fashioned postcards were used again during the pandemic, after abandoning this form of communication years ago. Church members reported how important these signs of solidarity and closeness were and are to them—even though one person stated: “You know, Pastor, I don't read everything you send out, but I find these regular letters, newsletters, etc. very

important, helpful and valuable.” Of course, there is also other, negative feedback: “It’s too much. You are overdoing it!” What remains? The autonomy experienced and lived in different congregations of our church. What else remains? The appreciation for continuities in congregational and church life.

The media presence on the part of almost every congregation has increased. This has increasingly led to the fact that the worship services are suddenly perceived as unlimited in terms of space and time. Two examples: the above mentioned “Blütenlese” (composite) worship services are now celebrated all over the world; Zoom church services and events still have a local flavor but are celebrated by people from a geographical distance. New forms of worship, fellowship, and communication are being discovered in church. Many services or duties that were offered at the beginning of the pandemic (mainly delivered by pastors) were gradually withdrawn in the past year. The tenor of the statements in this regard usually is this: “I can’t manage to go two ways,” meaning live and public services as well as digital formats. Or did they *e silentio* become disillusioned that their diverse offerings were not as much in demand as some may have expected?

New places for delivering worship services (even within a church building) were explored. Suddenly, the interior design of the church has become an issue. This also applies to churches that have their doors open seven days a week, where tourists and pilgrims stop by and are received as guests. The “open air” events seem to be accompanied by a certain latitude and freedom, which is reflected in more entertaining sermons and a streamlined worship service. Customary and well-known liturgical forms were either augmented or compressed. What remains? A new exploration of liturgical essentials, church interior design, and worship aesthetics.

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Let us fleetingly touch on the topic of church music, choir rehearsals, and instrumental choirs, and singing in church. In several SELK congregations the loss of communal singing was perceived as the greatest limitation during the pandemic. There were congregations where many events could continue almost as usual, whereas in others everything came to a standstill for a long time. A longing for the traditional, familiar, rich musical offering will, in my opinion, lead to great disappointment. In this context, I also believe that things that no longer work, or worked only to a limited extent in parishes and church districts before the pandemic, will not improve after the pandemic. Even though many would like to start anew and present new, diverse, and ambitious offerings, these sentiments, viewed in the light of day should be treated with caution; much of that will remain unsuccessful. Perhaps, as a small, manageable church, we will rediscover that we cannot and do not have to cover everything. What remains? The disillusionment with events and groups that will no longer be possible.

Topics that will become more relevant as we live with the Coronavirus are these: missing church services especially for children; VBS and confirmation classes; youth groups and camps that did not take place at all, in certain places not for months, some not even to this very day. If one should mention one age group where there are significant social losses, it is the children and especially young people between 16 and 23

years of age. The isolation and clearly perceptible loneliness imposed on them will have to be considered and dealt with in the long term. What remains? The challenge of focusing specifically on therapeutic and pastoral support, especially for young people—not to mention the postponed weddings, baptisms, confirmations, 'round' birthdays and many other things in congregational life! What about the pent-up grief over burial rituals that could not be performed during the pandemic? What remains? The grief and loss of what did not happen during the pandemic and the challenge of facing it in everyday pastoral care.

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It is an old experience that in stressful situations it is important to find ways where the pent-up stress and anger can vent, where there are 'valves' to let off steam. I can foresee, and we are already experiencing, how old fundamentalist sentiments, with which one comes into contact in pastoral care, are rekindled. We will not only have to deal with opponents of all innovations in the future, but now lateral thinkers, vaccine opponents, and radicalized people are creating a new stress factor. There are new waves of fundamentalism to be expected here. Sure, freedom of conscience and freedom of expression must be valued and maintained, but also freedom in matters of faith. Real caring can also mean resisting the fundamentalist currents of our day.

In the future, we will need confession, supervision, and mutual support in clerical conversations to be able to do our service professionally in the *una sancta*. Our God has endowed us with senses, reason, and intellect and we are allowed to use them, and God certainly does not expect us to fail. What remains? The professional handling of fundamentalist sentiments of whatever kind and the self-care on the part of the pastor.

So-called megatrends develop slowly, but they have an even more powerful effect on all levels of society and influence our "indispensable contemporaneity" as the church in our society. That is why it is worth looking beyond one's own nose, a look that the German *Zukunftsinstitut* makes possible. The *ZI* has been drawing attention to the possibility of a global pandemic (amongst other things) for a good ten years. I'll mention just a few keywords:

- The relationship between local and global is being rebalanced. An increase in local, national, and regional autonomy is to be expected, a new balance between cosmopolitanism and a sense of homeland. We can ask ourselves how this will affect our church-structures.

- The pandemic has generalized the active use of digital offerings of all kinds. Since Coronavirus we have, more than ever before, been living in a real-digital world in which the strict separation between analog and virtual is becoming completely obsolete. Are we on our way to a hybrid future? And also, in church?
- The great shift in values that is taking place around individualization has also been driven by the pandemic. The previous individualism has made way for a new “we-culture,” with the desire for solidarity, belonging, and social resonance. It’s not just about relationships with other people, but also resonance with nature and the things that surround us.

The pandemic triggered a megatrend surge. The SELK should utilize this to its full advantage. Sustainable digital offerings from the SELK (on an easily accessible platform) would be an opportunity to reach completely different layers of the population during this time, autonomous, and new we-cultures. Both the real encounters and the digital formats of congregational services can complement each other well. We might reflect on where we could get the strength to serve both areas and where we want to set priorities.

As part of the *una sancta*, we must be the bearers of the word of reconciliation and redemption through Jesus Christ, even in the middle of a pandemic. There will always be people who pray and do what is right, while waiting hopefully for God's time. In this community we are called on to provide a way into the future, God's future, and walk and talk very confidently. Because there are such people during the ongoing pandemic who pray to God—also for us as workers in the church—people who stand up for justice and approach it aggressively; at the same time, it is very calming for us as the church to wait for God's time. We seek our way towards the future with and post-Corona. The SELK is being asked: How do we get out of the Corona crisis and what remains? The answer is: the actual work is still ahead of us.

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As pastor/superintendent, I am starting where our congregation/our church district finds itself to be, rather than how I would like it to be. Dreams, goodbye! To accept things as they are, in my opinion, is not a weakness or nakedness. But it doesn't alter my perspective to change things that can be changed, according to our ideals. If we want to change something, we should start where we are now.

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