

**Wartburg 28 July 2019 Dedication of the Worship Centre of the
United Evangelical Lutheran Congregation
1 Corinthians 3**

(Background: Three congregations - Harburg, New Hanover and Wartburg - amalgamated in 2018. Together they built a worship centre in Wartburg that is now dedicated to the service of Christ. The region has, over the years, seen splits, break aways and fierce competition between Christian Congregations. Terms such as 12volt Church and 24 volt Church have been used to ridicule each other. The hurt lies deep. The passage from 1 Cor. 3 speaks into such a situation in Corinth. In the sermon I address the UELC members to make sure that they build on the foundation, and also work together with the other congregations in the region, who are all, as Church of Christ, building on the same foundation. Members of various of these other congregations shared in this service, making it a visible sign of this being on the same foundation Jesus Christ, and the appeal of Paul being followed by members in all of the congregations.)

Paul writes: By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. 11For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, 13their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. 14If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. 15If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.

Dear UELC congregation,
I must congratulate you. A lot was achieved during the last 12 months, so that today you can officially dedicate this building to the glory of God.
You have achieved something remarkable: From the outside it looks like a slightly larger house, but definitely not large enough for your use.
But when one then enters the building it looks like trickery - not only is it much bigger inside, there is just room after room (office, board room, library, store room, vestry and bathrooms), and then of course the large foyer and the very large main hall with lots and lots of space.
One must congratulate the designer.

Wondering how it this optical illusion was achieved, I took another look at the building from outside. The windows and doors are proportionally higher and wider than standard. Combined with the higher walls and the silhouette of a domestic dwelling at first glance it looks like an ordinary house. But once inside you realise that windows and doors are over-dimensional and the space is big!

Of course, when I looked at the building, I also did it in view of this sermon and the text that you have on the plaque at the main entrance: “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ”.

Looking at the whole design I assume that the architect did spend a good time in designing the foundations. They have to carry a lot more wall and roof than in a normal house.

The foundation determines shape, height and extend of building.

It “carries” building and keeps it together. A good foundation carries the building, no matter what.

The text in 1 Corinthians 3 describes a situation that you, fortunately, did not have - where a building is build over a period of decades, and where the one who laid the foundation never sees the finished building. With this background the text becomes much more alive. There are many builders - but only one foundation. That means that future builders always need to check: Are we still on the foundation? Are the walls too big and heavy for the foundation? Or can the foundation carry much more than what we are building? Are we building too small? Too big?

Imagine having to build this your building without having any plans, and more importantly, building on a foundation that has already been covered by soil. A lot of time will then need to go into laying them bare again to determine the size and shape of what the original architect had in mind.

In the letter to the Corinthians Paul deals with a situation where various preachers are battling it out against one another. Each one, or at least his followers, claim to be the real Christians.

Does this sound familiar? We know that here in Wartburg, as also in almost every town in South Africa, various Christian congregations exist next to each other, and all to often in competition with another - just like in the Corinthian congregation.

Into that situation Paul then says: There is only one foundation! Many people build on it - and build with different materials - but the foundation is only one!

In today's language: There is no Lutheran Foundation, neither FELSISA nor ELCSA (N-T) nor ELCSA foundation. There is no Methodist foundation, nor Anglican, Pentecostal foundations. **There is only one foundation, Jesus Christ.** Yes, there are Lutheran walls, Methodist styles, etc. Eventually we will each and all have to give account as to how we did build on the foundation.

You, here at UELC, are part of the Church of Christ! Just as FELSISA next door is. Just as the Methodists are etc, etc.

I sometimes wonder how an outsider looks at the Church of Christ, not rising as one building on one foundation, but as lots and lots of buildings and shacks on one big foundation...

Using this analogy, there are two things that I want to highlight for you as UELC:

1. Keep checking whether you are still building on the foundation! Church history shows that the Church is quite good at building next to the foundation, following its own ideas rather than building the kingdom of Christ. You are not immune against this!

Keep asking: Are we making sure that each generation knows this foundation? That our children know that Christ is the Lord, on whom we build our lives? Is what we are doing in line with the foundation? Or are we just building a tin shack where the foundations are intended for something much bigger?

Are we thinking in line with the foundation? Or are we limiting ourselves to our small plans and our limited imagination? Do we see our role in God's wonderful plan for this region, or do we limit ourselves to the Lutherans that are part of our membership?

You have wonderful plans for the venues at Harburg and New Hannover, and for Wartburg as your worship centre. Can it be that God intends the blessing to flow much broader and wider than you currently can imagine?

Can it be that you are seeing a "home", just like this building looks like a normal home from the outside, but that God has much bigger plans and ideas? So, dear sisters and brothers, keep looking at the foundation, at Jesus Christ, and keep asking yourself: Is our work reflecting this foundation?

2. Do your level best to work together with those building on the same foundation. Yes, I specifically refer to Kirchdorf, but also to the other congregations in this area. No matter what, do your level best to work together. There are times when it works well, there are times when it doesn't

work well. Don't give up! Because there is only one foundation. It does not matter whether they accept you or not. Based on the plaque at your door you should know, and keep on reminding yourself: We are building on the same foundation! We will not jeopardize our neighbours' building. We will not ridicule their style. Rather, we want to do our level best that outsiders can see that there is only one Church of Christ - and it is much bigger than even our new United Lutheran Congregation!

Keep on inviting, even when you are not invited. Keep on engaging, even when you are rejected. Keep on reaching out, even when you only receive a cold shoulder.

Paul made it very clear: There is only one Saviour - Jesus Christ! And all of us are merely builders, messengers, servants of this one Jesus Christ.

My prayer for you is that you realise, as we will be singing just now, that Christ is building a people of power that will move through this land by his spirit - and you are part of this.

May your region be blessed through what you are embarking on. May the other congregations in the region be blessed through what is happening with you, and may you be blessed through what the Lord is doing with them!

But, most of all, may the people who currently have no congregation, those children who currently have no, or only a miserable education, also get to know this foundation, Jesus Christ.

In closing: I noticed that your worship space does not really have windows. And the cross in the front, shining beautifully, can only be seen from within the worship space. "What a pity" I thought. But then I realised: No - the cross can be seen shining outside: Through you! The worship space has windows, lots of them: You are the windows through which the praise to the Lord will resound. You are the windows through which outsiders can get a glimpse of God's grace and feel invited to come in!

From the outside your congregation is not that big. But I believe that if one could look into your hearts, that there is much more going to happen, much more blessing to flow than one could ever have imagined!

The Lord is building, is building his people of power. You are part of them!

Amen

Horst Müller, Bishop ELCSA (N-T) Email: hmuller@elcsant.org.za