

Firm - And eager to learn
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1. Introduction

Heroes are something special - people to look up to, examples to follow. Heroes of Faith - people who had the courage to stand up for what they believe, even in the face of death.

“Here I stand - I can do no other - so help me God!” Powerful words, that have become synonymous with Martin Luther appearing before the emperor and representatives of the Church. “Here I stand” - I will not budge, I will not be swayed! I know what I believe, and I stick to it - so help me God! That seems to be the attitude behind these words.

Many a statue ¹around the world portrays Luther before the emperor: Feet firmly on the ground, upright posture, the hero of faith, ready to face the world.

And many believe that is how true Lutherans should be: Totally convinced, unswayed, unmovable. Nothing can change their mind!

Yet reality was quite different. And Luther himself saw things quite different. Let us have a closer look.



¹Statue of Luther in front of the Frauenkirche, Dresden. Photo: H Müller

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a. Luther in Worms

When Luther appeared before the emperor, he was scared, intimidated. His response was so softly spoken that he had to be told to speak up. Upon the challenge to recant his writing, he requested another day’s time to deliberate.² That was not strategy or tactics - Luther genuinely was struggling about what to do.

The next day, he gave a long reply, upon which he was challenged to be precise and to the point. This was his response: “Unless I am convicted by the testimony of Scripture or by evident reason - for I trust neither in popes nor in councils alone, since it is obvious that they have often erred and contradicted themselves - I am convicted by the Scripture which I have mentioned and my conscience is captive by the Word of God. Therefore I cannot and will not recant, since it is difficult, unprofitable and dangerous indeed to do anything against one's conscience. God help me. Amen.”³

By no means did Luther say: I will not budge, I will not be swayed. Rather, he stated: I am convinced, but if you can prove me wrong, I will recant. If you can show me, from scripture, that I am wrong, I will withdraw. In fact, he states: if you can convince me otherwise from the gospels and prophets, I will recant. I will be the first to throw my books into the fire!⁴

His followers and tradition turned him into the unbudging hero. He himself never saw it like this.

Perhaps this is most evident in his Preface to his own writings.

b. Luther in his Preface

²Then Dr. Eck began to condemn Luther's writings and asked Luther directly to revoke them. Luther said, "I humbly beseech the Imperial Majesty to grant me liberty and leisure to deliberate; so that I may satisfy the interrogation made unto me, without prejudice of the Word of God, and peril of my own soul." Upon this Dr. Eck commanded him to reappear next day at the same time." from Luther in Worms, <http://www.specialtyinterests.net/lutherwords.html>

³Ibid

⁴Translated from “Rede auf dem Reichstag zu Worms”

i. Preface to German edition 1939:⁵

This preface was written when large parts of Germany had opened up to the reformation and the split with the Roman Catholic Church had happened. Many states and rulers were following the reformer. This resulted in numerous requests for the works of Luther to be published as an omnibus volume. Luther had time and again refused to give his permission, but finally conceded. He writes: “Then, too, it was our intention and our hope, when we began to put the Bible into German, that there would be less writing, and more studying and reading of the Scriptures. For all other writings should point to the Scriptures, as John pointed to Christ, when he said, “He must increase, but I must decrease.” In this way every one may drink for himself from the fresh spring, as all the Fathers have had to do when they wished to produce anything worth while.”⁶

“Since, however, I cannot prevent it, and, without my wish, they are now bent on collecting and printing my books — small honour to me — I shall have to let them put their energy and labour on the venture. I comfort myself with the thought that my books will yet lie forgotten in the dust, especially when, by God’s grace, I have written something good.”⁷ (Luther refers to his observation that good books seem to become forgotten soon - it is the lesser ones that seem to last longer!)

“Well, then, let it go, in God’s Name. I only ask in all kindness that the man who wishes at this time to have my books will by no means let them be a hindrance to his own study of the Scriptures, but read them as I read the orders and the ordures of the pope and the books of the sophists. I look now and then to see what they have done, or learn from them the history and thought of their time, but I do not study them, or feel myself bound to conform to them”

In the preface to the Latin edition of 1545 he is just as harsh, calling his writings a “jumble of nightly writings” (“das Durcheinander meiner nächtlichen Schreibereien”)⁸

In this preface he also describes, how with time he matured and grew in wisdom. Therefore he urges the readers to be circumspect when dealing with his

⁵English translation from

<http://beggarsallreformation.blogspot.com/2005/10/selections-from-luthers-prefaces-to-his.html>

⁶Ibid

⁷Ibid

⁸Martin Luther *Ausgewählte Schriften*” hg Karin Bornkamm und Gerhard Ebeling, 2. Auflage 1983, Insel Verlag Frankfurt am Main, Bd 1, S 13

writings, and not treat it as the ultimate wisdom. He would much rather have them forgotten soon.⁹

How then is it that Luther became such a Hero of Faith, if he himself had a very different opinion of himself?

The reason is that Luther's strength did not lie in his inventions and ideas, but in what he discovered in the scriptures. The Reformation was not a celebration of his ideas and inventions, but the rediscovery of the message of the gospels and especially Paul's letters.

Luther's strength lay outside himself! That is why he saw himself as a continuously learning and growing person, and by no means as a completed scholar.

"Firm - and eager to learn" is a good summary of his attitude. He was firmly rooted, and because of that committed to grow and learn more. He did not see himself as great, but he had a great story to tell! And all his life he kept on discovering more of this greatness!

I have divided the address into two sections: Today we will deal with "Firm", and tomorrow with "Eager to learn"

2. Firm

I would like to use an illustration as to how I understand this "Firm". As a child I once did rock-climbing, and loved it. Only many years later, during a

⁹"EDITION OF ABOVE all things I beseech the Christian reader and beg him for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ, to read my earliest books very circumspectly and with much pity, knowing that before now I too was a monk, and one of the right frantic and raving papists. When I took up this matter against Indulgences, I was so full and drunken, yea, so besotted in papal doctrine that, out of my great zeal, I would have been ready to do murder — at least, I would have been glad to see and help that murder should be done all who would not be obedient and subject to the pope, even to his smallest word."

"I tell these things to the end that, if thou shalt read my books, thou mayest know and remember that I am one of those who, as St. Augustine says of himself, have grown by writing and by teaching others, and not one of those who, starting with nothing, have in a trice become the most exalted and most learned doctors. We find, alas! many of these self-grown doctors; who in truth are nothing, do nothing and accomplish nothing, are moreover untried and inexperienced, and yet, after a single look at the Scriptures, think themselves able wholly to exhaust its spirit." English translation from <http://beggarsallreformation.blogspot.com/2005/10/selections-from-luthers-prefaces-to-his.html>

sabbatical in Germany, did I again have the opportunity to climb. A good friend took me along. He soon realised that I was quite inexperienced. So he would always climb ahead, and have me follow. After observing me for a while, he told me the “golden rule of climbing”: You must always have three secure holds: Two hands and a foot, or two feet and a hand! Once three points are firm, you can then reach for the next hold or grip for your other hand, or a ledge for your other foot. Three anchor points - then you can move forward! Indeed, in climbing I realised: If I only have two secure points, or, even worse, only one, I will either fall, or I cling to the ones I have with all my energy and become frozen, unmovable, stuck to the rock.

With this image I want to illustrate what it means to be “firm” as a Christian.

- a. The Rope: We are not the lead climbers - we are following Christ, who leads the way. When calling his disciples, Jesus time and again makes it clear that HE is leading. (Mk 8,34 Then Jesus called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.)

When following the leader at climbing, you are often in a situation where you cannot see the lead climber. You just see the rope, the sign that he is ahead of you. Sometimes you can hear his voice, directing you around difficult obstacles.

This, to me, is a crucial part of being a Christian: I am following. I cannot see Jesus, but the “rope” is there, his promises that he will be with us, (Mt 28, 20), that he will lead and guide us (John 14, 16ff - he will send the counsellor, the Holy Spirit, who will guide us)

Another thing with the rope is: it is not prescriptive, but gives direction. Each climber has to find his own route along the rope, some go to the left, others to the right, depending on ability and what you see as a good route. The end-destination is clear, the general direction. But each step is your own.

Sometimes I wish that Jesus would have given us a complete instruction on every aspect of being a Christian - a manual catering for every eventuality. But he did not. He gives the direction (all nations shall hear the gospel) and general pointers: Love your neighbour, forgive each other, love yourself. But the details I have to work out myself, as I “climb”

In the history of the Church it happened time and again that Churches tried to be more precise, more prescriptive. Long catalogues of do’s and don’ts. But this does not lead to a life of following Christ the Lord.

Rather it leads to a life of completing instructions or failing to do so. Jesus says: I live, and you too shall live (Jn 14, 19). Following Christ is about living!

The wonderful thing about the rope is that it does not restrict the climber, but frees him to move onward. With good climbing the rope is always slack, it is just when you slip and fall that it tightens, prevents you from falling to your death. Following Christ, his direction, sets me free to move forward - and when I slip, he catches me. His love, his forgiveness pick me up and help me to find my feet again!

And now, let us look at the footholds, the 3 anchors that we as Christians need to be firmly rooted.

b. Foundations

i. Christ - 1 Cor 3,11 For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. It seems to be obvious, but it is not. Over the years I have regularly asked new confirmands: What is a Christian? The most common answer was: "Someone who keeps the commandments" followed by: "Someone who believes in God"

It is Christ who makes us Christians! The Son of God who died for us, and rose again, so that we can become Children of God.

(1) Personal relationship with Christ: Each generation has to learn this afresh, experience it for themselves: Jesus Christ is my Lord and Saviour! Someone once said: God does not have grandchildren! Put otherwise: Christianity cannot be inherited. Just like human beings are not mass-produced or just appear, but each one is born, so Christians do not just happen, appear, but are born from above, by God.

(a) Baptism. In our Church and all Churches that practise infant baptism it is crucial that we take great care in explaining to the parents the significance of this event. And it is crucial to emphasise that this baptism is the beginning of a road, not a moment that comes and goes. Here the image of birth is quite helpful: No parents in their right mind will, after birth, deposit their child in the baby room and leave it to fend for itself. All good parents know that the nurturing and caring now really starts. Parents, congregations, need to take this nurturing of the children seriously, so that they grow up,

from out of their baptism, as Christians!

- (b) Confirmation. “How do you get the bats out of the church roof? Baptise them, confirm them, and you’ll never see them again” Perhaps this joke was thought of by a pastor? Yes, it remains a moral conflict to see young people disappearing after confirmation class. Various different systems are being investigated, congregations try different models. Ultimately the confirmation: “Yes, I want to follow Christ” cannot be institutionalised. Yet, good confirmation class and preparation are indeed a help to many young people to grow firm in their commitment to Christ.
 - (c) Daily renewal. In his small Catechism Luther points out that a Christian starts each day anew and afresh in Christ.¹⁰
- (2) Love for Christ needs to be kindled. Being a Christian is “normal”, nothing special, nothing spectacular. Everybody is a Christian. This is what many of us experience and how we grew up. One of the seven letters in Revelation addresses this: “Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love” (Rev 2,4).

However, when one encounters “First Generation Christians” it becomes apparent that being a Christian is something incredibly special, a wonderful privilege. (For Example the young congregation in Thessalonika, about which Paul writes: We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ...You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. 1 Thess 1, 3ff)

How do we kindle the love? Perhaps the most important is to emphasise: **“It’s not all about ME!”**

¹⁰*4 What does Baptism mean for daily living?*

It means that our sinful self, with all its evil deeds and desires, should be drowned through daily repentance; and that day after day a new self should arise to live with God in righteousness and purity forever.

St. Paul writes in Romans 6:

"We were buried therefore with Him by Baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."

- (a) His congregation: The Christian Faith is in essence a “community faith”. Christians are drawn into the community of believers. The “Lord’s Prayer” does not speak about “I” and Me, but of “Us” and “We”
 - (i) We therefore need to continue to emphasise the Worship service as heartbeat of the congregation and celebration of Christ’s grace.
 - (ii) Various forms of fellowship need to be encouraged, such as house groups, youth groups and other gatherings. There Christians must have the opportunity to get to know another share with each other.
 - (iii) Care systems need to be strengthened, such as visiting the sick and frail, caring for the needy.
- (b) His Church. Just as it is not all about ME, it also is not all about MY CONGREGATION. The letters of Paul are an excellent example - as he writes to one congregation he passes greetings from where he currently resides. He urges the recipients of one letter to pass it to the next congregation and read their letter in return (Col 4,16). He urges all his congregations to collect funds for the Church in Jerusalem - although most have no contact at all with this congregation.(1 Cor 16,1)
The network of congregations in our Church should be strengthened, and combined festivals supported!
- (c) His Mission. It’s not all about ME, nor MY CONGREGATION, nor MY CHURCH - it’s about Jesus Christ’s wish that the gospel should reach all nations.

In summing up: The first Anchor, Christ, is not only there to hold on to, but to share, so that others can find him too!

ii. Scripture

Hans Bernd von Haefen, German Diplomat involved in the plot to topple Hitler, writes to his wife after receiving his death sentence on 15 August 1944, and before his execution a few hours later: “In only a few hours I will fall into God’s Hands. Therefore I now want to bid farewell to you and the children. ...Let the children learn off by heart - Bible texts, Hymns, so that, in time of need, these are in their heart. There will be times of Doubt and sliding away from God. But life will bring these children back to the firm foundation, if it has been laid in their youth.

Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life!” He only has an hour or two left, only a short time to write what is most important to him. He focusses on the importance for the Children to know the Bible! He is one of many Christians, who in most difficult times have realised the importance of this, the second, anchor.

Getting a firm footing in this regard can be divided into three steps:

- (1) Basic knowledge - This involves being able to handle the Bible (it is amazing how many people hardly ever touch that book, and have no idea whether Galatians is Old or New Testament etc).
 - (a) Children’s Church. There was a time when Bibles were incredibly expensive. You only got your first Bible at Confirmation. This is no longer the case! There is no excuse for a Child that can read NOT to have a Bible! Children’s Ministry should, literally, take a “hands on” approach towards the Bible.
 - (b) Confirmation Class. Although contemporary topics form an important part of Confirmation Class, Confirmands should also receive help to read the Bible on their own. Working with Bible text should be a regular part of confirmation class - not with copied pages, but with the book itself! Getting to know the outline of the Bible - Books of the Old and New Testament, and where to find which book makes it much easier for them to find passages quickly.
 - (c) Youth. Youth Groups are ideal to show the link between the scriptures and daily life. Our young people need to discover that the Bible is a companion, rather than an ancient closed book!
 - (d) House groups. Many congregations do have house groups. This continually needs to be encouraged. As far as possible such house groups should function without the pastor, but not without training of house group leaders. House groups are ideal for adults to discover the Bible and learn to appreciate it.
 - (e) PRIVATE Bible reading. In our tradition many households still read devotional books, which is wonderful. With this point, however, I want to encourage individuals to read the Bible for themselves, on a daily basis. One can either follow

a Bible reading plan¹¹, or read through a book at the time.

(f) Sermons. Pastors should spend a good deal of time researching the Scriptures in preparation of sermons. Although the sermon should not be confused with a lecture, it is often helpful to the listener if background information on the text and circumstances of the text are given. Thus, bit by bit, the Bible knowledge grows.

(2) The next step is in depth Bible study. Whereas the “basic knowledge” should aim at every Christian, and be taken for granted for all Christians, we need to nurture a love for intenser study of the scriptures. In the late 1940’s Pastor Anton Engelbrecht caused a lot of tension in the Church through his teachings. It ended with him leaving the Church in 1951. “Don’t throw out the child with the bath water” goes the old saying. Precisely that happened here. One of Anton Engelbrecht’s strengths was that he worked with House Groups and Bible studies. The Hermannsburg church, fearing heresies, decided to ban such meetings in all congregations, unless the pastor lead them. For decades to come people were scared of Bible study. When I started as a Pastor and tried to invite people to a Bible Study, I had to fight this “ghost”. One person, in all sincerity, said to me: If you read to much in the Bible you only end up with strange thoughts. Upon which I responded: If you do not study the Bible you will never realise how strange your thoughts are! (Wer zuviel Bible liest, kommt nur auf dumme Gedanken. Wer nicht in der Bible liest, merkt gar nicht, wie dumm seine Gedanken sind!)

Let me again quote Luther from his preface to his writings: “Then, too, it was our intention and our hope, when we began to put the Bible into German, that there would be less writing, and more studying and reading of the Scriptures. For all other writings should point to the Scriptures, as John pointed to Christ, when he said, “He must increase, but I must decrease.” In this way every one may drink for himself from the fresh spring, as all the Fathers have had to do when they wished to produce

¹¹ English: <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/The-Bible/Read-the-Bible.aspx>
German: <http://www.oeab.de/bibelleseplan/>

anything worth while.” Never be afraid to study too much in the scriptures! Rather be careful not to stop too soon!

- (a) House groups. These are a good tool for more intense Bible study. One might, over a period of some weeks, work through a letter of Paul, or a section of a gospel, going into the background, the context of the passage, which will deepen the understanding of that passage.
 - (b) Seminars. For many years we had the “Studientagungen”, Study retreats with Pastor Klaus Vollmer. They had a tremendous impact on our Church. Many a young person was challenged through them to study theology. And all over the Church I meet active people in congregations who received a good grounding during these retreats. Perhaps it is time that we start something in that line again. Let me call it “Input Events” - where old and young from across the Church and even other Churches gather for a few days of intense work on a topic, a passage, a Bible book. I personally found this mixture of young and old at these retreats a special blessing!
 - (c) Private Bible Study. I am aware that many people do not have much time each day for private devotion and prayer. But if you do, why not do some in depth Bible study, using a good Bible with commentaries, or commentaries on Bible books, to assist you. The internet also has become a valuable research tool. Unfortunately there also is a lot of dubious material floating around. Yet, the more you know, the easier it will be to distinguish. And do not hesitate to ask your pastor!
- (3) The third step I want to sum up, again quoting Luther: “Oratio, Meditatio, Tentatio”: Pray, Study, trial/conflict/doubt. This is a contradiction, yet so true: As we pray and study, it is the times of doubt, trial and temptation that really deepen our understanding- or perhaps I should say, that lead to wisdom! Being firm in the scriptures does not mean not to have doubt, but to be confronted with my limitations of understanding, the limitations of the written word, and situations where I lack answers. We just need to study the letters of Paul to realise how

much he had to deal with tentatio, and how that really strengthened him and gave him credibility! (2 Corinthians 12, 6ff)¹²

iii. Tradition and History. This third anchor point is perhaps the most misunderstood. Some tend to ignore it totally, resulting in foolish decisions being taken and mistakes from the past being repeated. Others place so much emphasis on tradition and history that they are stuck and cannot move forward. Tradition and History become a good foothold when we understand why we do what we do.

(1) Church History. As a student this subject was to me the most fascinating one. It is the golden opportunity to learn from the mistakes of others. And it is humbling, because you realise: Foolish decisions were often taken with deep conviction. This causes me always to keep in mind: I might be wrong! Especially when I am 100% sure of myself!

History and Tradition help me to understand where I come from, and why things are being done as they are. Based on that understanding I can then also, with insight, see things that need to be changed or abandoned.

(a) Of our Lutheran Church and Reformation. I am a huge fan of ecumenical co-operation. Yet there is a big difference between ecumenical co-operation and wishy-washy, directionless harmony. When I understand where we come from, who we are, and what makes us different from other denominations, our co-operation complements each other to the glory of God.

On quite a few occasions I have come across people claiming that they are non-denominational, purely Bible based Christians. I admire their sincerity, and pity their stupidity. The very moment that I start explaining a Bible text to someone, I am no longer “purely Biblical”. I might not

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So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

follow the teachings of a particular Church, but my interpretation is already interpretation, doctrine, my own flavour. When we realise that each teaching, each sermon, each message is coloured by human thought and interpretation, we lose the fear of saying: I am a Lutheran, and my understanding of the Bible is influenced by this tradition.

- (b) The Global Church. Too many Christians know only their own Church and tradition. When reading about the Church world wide, it can be confusing - but it also gives you a glimpse of how great God is. The gospel of John states: “Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.” (John 21,25). Looking at the global Church I want to add: Our God is so great - all Christian Churches together cannot contain everything that is to be said about him!
 - (c) Lutherans in South Africa. We are quite a divided community: the split in 1892 between the “Free Evangelical Lutheran Synod” and the “Landeskirchen”, the division between Black and White, Language groupings, etc can be very confusing to outsiders, but also to Lutherans themselves. History has shown that where two Churches were united without understanding why they were separate, it often resulted in three Churches: the two old ones and the united one. For us to get closer to each other we need to understand why we are divided. The EKD has started a lengthy study process on the role of the German Churches in Southern Africa, and I am hopeful that this will help us to understand many things better.¹³
- (2) Traditions. “I like this service - it does not have a liturgy” is a comment that I have heard frequently. Sorry chap! It does! It might not be the Gregorian liturgy - but it does have an order, a sequence. Unless it is totally unplanned. But even then it has a liturgy - a chaotic liturgy!

¹³ Phase one has been completed and is published under the title: “Deutsche Evangelische Kirche im kolonialen südlichen Afrika”, Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden 2011, ISBN 978-3-447-06535-1. The English translation is being prepared currently.

I am not pleading for a revival of the Gregorian Liturgy, nor for the abandonment of it. I am pleading for more understanding of what we do when we celebrate our services. All too often I have been challenged by someone: “This service is not Lutheran anymore!” - What is a Lutheran service? How does a Lutheran Church look like? What does a Lutheran pastor wear?

The answer is quite simple: Service according to Agenda 1, the Lutheran Church has an Altar, candles and a cross, and the pastor wears a black garment, talar, with beffchen. What most people do not know is that this standardisation only happened in the nineteenth century when the Prussian king, tired of the huge variety in traditions and liturgies, ordered a standardisation for protestant Churches in his kingdom. I always believed that Luther did away with the white clerical garments and introduced the black talar. Yet, paintings of the Cranach family, contemporaries of Luther, portray him officiating in a variety of garments. To Luther these were non-central issues, to be dealt with according to circumstances, supporting the spread of the gospel. As we get to understand these traditions, we gain the wisdom to make meaningful changes, and also learn to appreciate the gems amongst our traditions.

These then are the three anchor points that we need for a firm footing. If the footing is not firm, we will cling to whatever we have and not budge - until we slip and fall. But once the footing is firm, we can climb ahead, reach for the next challenge on our journey.

Group work:

All groups:

Share your spontaneous thoughts on what you heard.

GROUP 1: Foothold 1: Christ

- What is being done in your congregation so that each generation can discover Christ as Saviour?
- What are others doing, that we can learn from?
- Baptism: How serious is this new beginning taken?
- Confirmation: Share with each other positive experiences where confirmation classes or services helped young people to become firm.
- Daily renewal: How is this practised by you? How can it be encouraged?

Group 2: Foothold 1: Christ

- Love for Christ - share about a positive encounter with a new Christian.

- Congregation: what is done/can we do to nurture the sense of community and fellowship in our congregations?
- The Church: How aware is your congregation of the wider Lutheran Church? What can be done to strengthen this awareness?
- His Mission: How high on the agenda of your congregation is Christ's wish that all nations should become disciples? What can be done /should be done in this regard?

Group 3: Foothold 2: Scripture

- Basic knowledge: Share with each other how you would sum up the situation in your congregation.
- What good experiences and approaches can you share with others in any of the mentioned fields: Children, Confirmation groups, Youth, House groups, Private Bible study, Sermons?

Group 4: Foothold 2: Scripture

- In depth study: What is your opinion on "Input Events" such as study retreats for the Church?
- What should be dealt with at such events?
- Pray, study, trial/temptation/doubts - are you willing to share with the group where you have gone through such trials, and how (whether) they helped you to become firmly anchored?

Group 5: Foothold 3: History and Tradition

- Share significant highlights that you know about the history of your congregation (BRIEFLY!)
- What would you regard as significant highlights in the 30 year history of ELCSA (N-T)?
- What would you regard as significant moments in the 2000 year history of the Church?

Group 6: Foothold 3: History and Tradition

- Share significant highlights that you know about the history of your congregation (BRIEFLY!)
- What would you regard as significant highlights in the 30 year history of ELCSA (N-T)?
- What have you seen/heard/experienced at other Churches that could be valuable to our Church, your congregation?

Group 7: History and Tradition

- Which traditions in your congregation / our Church are precious to you?
- Which traditions in your congregation / our Church puzzle you?

Group 8: In your opinion:

- Which of the footholds (or the rope) need the most urgent attention?
- What should be done?

Firm - And eager to learn

Part 2: And eager to learn

1. Introduction to Part 2

In the image of the rock climber I stated that once you have found three good holds, you can reach for the next, climb ahead. For a climber it is quite obvious that you carry on climbing once you are secure.

When formulating the topic for synod, time and again we said: Firm, but eager to learn. Note: BUT. Yet the topic is: Firm, AND eager to learn. “But” would indicate that the two are opposites, and we try to bring them together. I do, however, believe that they are not opposites, but that in the life of a Christian they belong together. When we stop learning, we are not firm, but stagnating. There is a huge difference between being firmly rooted and being stuck! When I stop learning, I am stuck!

Therefore the challenge is to cultivate an eagerness to learn, to grow, to move forward, rather than accepting complacency. Being a Christian has to do with movement, with growth, with life!

In the preface to the German edition of his works Luther speaks about the importance of learning and studying. With his typical sharp tongue he then remarks that there are, of course, those “instant wise people” who are totally satisfied with their achievements and believe that they are indeed wise. “If you are like that, my dear, just grab your own ears. And if you grab them properly you will discover a nice pair of long, furry donkey’s ears”¹⁴



¹⁴Translated from German: Martin Luther, *Ausgewählte Schriften*, Bd 1, Hg Karin Bornkamm und Gerhard Ebeling, Insel Verlag, 1983, Seite 11

I have divided the “eager to learn” into various sub-categories where I believe we as Christians need to be challenged to learn.

... And eager to learn

- a. Faith and Theology: God is bigger than any one church/doctrine/person can grasp. In 1 Cor 13,9 Paul states: “for we know in part” (“Unser Wissen ist Stückwerk!”) This is also apparent from our Lutheran Confessions which state that all writings need to be measured and judged against the Holy Scripture, and be corrected accordingly.¹⁵
“I know where I stand - and I stand to be corrected!

Some pointers in this regard.

- i. It is vital that we do not get stuck with Luther. He himself was of the opinion that his writings would soon be outdated and surpassed by new scholars. We know that he, however, was brilliant, gifted, guided by the Holy Spirit in such a way that his thoughts and writings are to a large extent still relevant today. Yet, we need to make sure that we do not focus on him, but on what he points at! To use an image: Luthers approach is a window through which we study the Bible, interpret Church and many issues of every day life. If, however, we glaze that window with a picture of Luther, then the window becomes the focal point, and that which is behind it, is no longer seen. This, unfortunately, has happened over and over in the history of the Church. Church Fathers, in stead of being pointers to Christ, became the ultimate authority, obscuring Christ. None of them ever intended it. The first one to experience this was Paul. In 1 Corinthians 1 he challenges the Corinthians about them following people rather than Christ. The apostles and church fathers and mothers are messengers of Christ, not saviours themselves! (1 Cor

¹⁵Epitome of the Formula of Concord: “1. We believe, teach, and confess that the sole rule and standard according to which all dogmas together with [all] teachers should be estimated and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and of the New Testament alone, as it is written Ps. 119:105: Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path. And St. Paul: Though an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you, let him be accursed, Gal. 1:8.

2] Other writings, however, of ancient or modern teachers, whatever name they bear, must not be regarded as equal to the Holy Scriptures, but all of them together be subjected to them, and should not be received otherwise or further than as witnesses, [which are to show] in what manner after the time of the apostles, and at what places, this [pure] doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved.

1, 10ff) For this reason I encourage people to read Luther himself, rather than summaries on Luther. Luther was positively Christ-obsessed, and you cannot help seeing Christ when reading his writings. Too many of the scholars writing on Luther tend to focus on the man, obscuring his passion for Christ.

- ii. Ecumenical encounters. This is one of the vital areas of learning where we need a lot of catching up to do. For centuries much energy has gone into erecting fences between denominations and condemning each other. This is totally against the wish of Jesus expressed in John 17, where he prays that his followers will be one. Although we most probably will never be one Church as organisation, we should work together, treat each other as sisters and brothers in service of the same Lord. And, with regard to learning, we should not see the other as an enemy, but as one from whom I can learn more about Christ.

Again I want to use an illustration: The observatory in Sutherland (Cape) is home to the South African Large Telescope - a huge mirror telescope consisting of 91 mirrors, each with a diameter of one metre. If the mirrors could speak, you might hear the following conversation: “We are many mirrors - but actually only I am really focussed totally in the right direction. See: I point directly at the target. The mirrors next to me are almost correct. But those on the other end point in a different direction all together - they totally miss the target!” Strangely enough, you would hear each mirror saying exactly the same! Each one believes to be best in focus.

The scientist who constructed the mirror, however, will point out: Each mirror is aligned according to it’s position - and all together they form a giant mirror, giving us pictures of astonishing clarity and brilliance!

Each Church sees itself as close to the truth and the gospel as possible. And those “on the other end” seem to be far off target. Yet the Lord of the Church knows: If all these Churches work together, learn from each other, support one another, the world will hear, see and experience the brilliant gospel of salvation!

Learning from each other then becomes a wonderful, enriching experience, without me losing my particular focal point and part in the mirror of the Church.

- iii. The constant reformation. God is a living God. The living God became living word (John 1). He promises life, and calls us to

follow. “Just as the Father sent me, so do I send you” (John 20,21) There is nothing static about the Church of Christ. Each generation faces different challenges, needs to witness the gospel to a different environment. When we do something differently from our forefathers, it does not mean that they were wrong. They lived in a different time. If they did something right, it does not mean that we are right if we keep on doing it in the same way. Of course many things are still valuable, many ways of doing are still appropriate. But time and again it is our duty to ask: Are we as Church still Christ-focussed? Are we as Church still fulfilling our calling? Are we still reaching people? If not, we need to address this!

- iv. Necessity of good theological training - Pastors that are well trained, knowledgeable, eager to learn (ongoing training). This was a major challenge to Luther. He was extremely worried about the low level of education of the clergy of his time. Again his sharp tongue lashes out. In his letter to the city councillors of all Germany, calling them to establish Christian Schools, he states that in the Roman Empire of old, education was taken seriously, leading to the huge political and military success. If one would put all the clergy and bishops of Germany together, it is most likely that their combined education will not surpass that of a Roman soldier!¹⁶

In this letter he makes some statements that are challenging to us as well, especially in view of theological training. He distinguishes between “ordinary preachers” (Schlichte Prediger des Glaubens) and the one that interprets scripture (Schriftausleger). The former can rely on Bible translations and commentaries and play a vital role in the lives of congregations. The latter, however, need to work with the original Greek and Hebrew texts. The Church needs such theologians that cannot only preach, but also deal with controversial topics, and assist and advise the ordinary preachers through the study of the scriptures¹⁷.

Currently many Churches tend to shorten the time of training of pastors, and many no longer expect them to study Greek and Hebrew. This development diminishes the capacity of the Church to deal with serious challenges.

¹⁶Ibid, Band v, S 50

¹⁷Ibid, Bd V, S 57

- b. God's creation. At the previous synod we extensively dealt with the topic of creation, and our responsibility towards it. For too long there was a tendency in the Church to regard this as a "non-spiritual" or "worldly" matter. Fortunately the awareness is growing amongst Christians that every aspect of my life is affected by my being a Christian. It is encouraging to see how more and more Christians now start seeing their daily lives as "Gottesdienst" - serving God. "Eager to learn" - because we are firmly rooted in Christ, we can make a difference in many areas of God's creation.
- i. Agriculture: Some farmers, also in our Church, have started to focus on sustainable farming practise. The immediate profits are not as good, but the long term benefits enormous. Christian farmers are challenged to look for better ways of farming, practises that glorify our Maker!
- ii. Science and Research: When universities started in the middle ages, the subject that formed the basis of all studies was theology. The problem was that theologians wanted to prescribe to scientists what they were allowed to discover and what not. With time theology and sciences became separate faculties, and especially separated faculties - opponents, even mutually exclusive studies. There is a wonderful report about Luther's views on the universe, which show how on the one hand he was very clued up about research, and on the other captive by the dominance of theological opinion over science. In one of his table talks he contemplates on the wonders of the universe - the incredible speed at which the stars and planets travel, the fact that most of them are much bigger than the earth. He is amazed that they do not disintegrate or melt, travelling at such high velocity. He however can not take serious the claims of some scientists that the earth is travelling around the sun. If that were the case, why does the Bible say that Joshua told the sun, and not the earth, to stand still?¹⁸ Despite this criticism, Luther admires and encourages these scientists that study God's creation and has them in high regard. Nowadays many scientists regard faith and theology as irrelevant. Christian scientist should be encouraged to "simply be the best" - You are researching your Lord's creation. Do it with pride and eagerly. In your research you discover God's ingenuity!

¹⁸Luther's Tischreden, Franckfurt am Mayn, Peter Smit, Sigmund Feyerabend, 1576, Seite 413a

Theology is not an enemy of science. It helps us to do our research responsibly, as custodians of the creator.

iii. Technology. I must admit that this is a passion of mine. New inventions show the creative genius that God has given some people. To visualize things that do not exist, and then build them, is a wonderful gift to mankind. When we separate our faith from this gift, it opens the doors to destructive and manipulative technology. However, if inventive Christians see their gift as gift from God, it is exciting!

(1) Embracing technology - not worshipping it, nor serving it. That is the challenge to us Christians. The Reformation was successful largely due to the inventing of the printing press. A 100 years earlier the reformational writings of Jan Hus could all be destroyed. But Luther's writings could be printed faster than the Church could burn them!

Christians and the Church are often wary of new technology, ascribing it to the devil, rather than claiming it to the glory of God! (Railway, Radio, Television - just to mention a few). Looking at most modern communication technology I challenge Christians to also claim it to the glory of God and not only leave them for the use by evil powers.

(a) Internet. Most Churches are already making use of this tool, but there is still much more potential.

(b) Facebook and Twitter. Yes, they are being abused by evil people. They have recently played a vital role in toppling governments. Church - wake up! This is a powerful tool to communicate the gospel, almost free of charge, almost without limitations. "Eager to learn"! Luthertwitter? Face the Book? Let them become part of our tools to witness Christ to the world!

(c) ?? Question mark. What technology is next to come? I hope that there will always be Christians who find ways of letting the latest technology serve the Saviour!

(2) Developing new Technology. For centuries Christians and Churches have been celebrating harvest thanksgiving. Each year God is thanked for the crop that he granted. I challenge us to celebrate "inclusive" harvest thanks giving: do not only display the fruits of the field. Display the fruits of the mind: New inventions, theses and dissertations, computer programmes,

handcraft, all from members of your congregation - the possibilities are endless. Let us thank God for the talents he has given us and the harvest resulting from it!

- c. History. Firm, And eager to learn. I already mentioned how knowing Church history gives us a good foundation. Christians should look also at general history. It will be a huge benefit when Christian politicians know the history of the country, where we come from, why things are as they are. Knowing history prevents us from believing cliché's and helps us towards taking meaningful decisions. Knowing history helps to keep us on our toes, so that we do not repeat mistakes from the past. Learning from the past opens the future.
- d. Economy. "You cannot serve God and Mammon" (Matthew 6, 24). But Jesus also said that we should use the Mammon (Luke 16,9). Let Mammon serve God!
 - i. Better economy. Firmly rooted Christians can help developing a better economy, an economy that uplifts communities, that is just and not destructive, that does not excessively enrich a few and impoverish many.
- e. Education. Church schools have played a vital role in the development of South Africa. Many good leaders have received their schooling at Church schools. At some stage under the old Government most of these became state schools. Only very few Church schools survived.
 - i. The current crisis. Compared to the rest of Southern Africa our schooling is dismal. Things have gone horribly wrong. Universities are receiving students with fair matric results, that are not capable of academic studies. Young people complete school and are still functionally illiterate. Can we as Church make a difference?
 - ii. Healthy education. The few remaining Church schools should continue to offer good, solid education. In his letter to city councilors, quoted earlier on, Luther laments the state of schools in Germany. But he also gives good, solid advice, which I believe is still very relevant today. Not only should children learn skills and study job-related subjects. Their general knowledge too should be increased. Luther mentions subjects such as history, geography, music and languages. All these increase the general intelligence of

the people.¹⁹ Sadly, precisely these subjects are often no longer taught at government schools. Luther states that neglecting to offer good education to children is the most serious crime the world can commit!²⁰

- f. Personal development. “Sein Leben war Arbeit und Müh” - “His life was toil and hard work” - this was regarded as a compliment. Slaving away, serving others without regard for yourself, is still seen by some as one of the highest virtues. Whilst I agree that some people do have a calling for such a life (Mother Theresa), and there are passages in the Bible that speak in that direction, there is, however, also another side. Jesus does not only say: Love your neighbour - but includes: As yourself! (Mt 22,39)

Paul does not only instruct Christian leaders to care for the flock, but starts with: “Pay careful attention *to yourselves* and to all the flock...” (Acts 20,28)

- i. Health care. It is sad that burnout is disproportionally high amongst clergy. But all of us, regardless of occupation, need to look for ways of “better living”, taking care of ourselves through healthy life style and habits. Of course one can argue that our body is only the earthen vessel that will perish - but we are also urged: “you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” (1 Corinthians 6,20)
- ii. Gaining wisdom. Some Christians think that it is best to shun all earthly things and focus only on God. By now you should have realised that focussing on God includes his creation and this world. We have been sent into this world, placed in this world. “Eager to learn” should include being interested in what is happening around us, being informed about “secular” as well as “spiritual” matters. Actually, I believe that for a Christian there is no “secular” sphere. Every aspect of my life is under God!
- iii. Growing in care/servanthood/love. “But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Mt 20, 26ff. When I am secure and firmly rooted, knowing that I am loved and accepted by God, I need not cling to status, but can indeed

¹⁹Ibid: Bd V, Seite 50ff.

²⁰Ibid: s 48

become a servant, just as Jesus is. Not a downtrodden servant, but a servant with dignity!

- g. The Church. Firmly rooted, I can look at the Church, my congregation, and ask: What needs to be improved? What should change? Not change for the sake of changing, but change for the benefit of the calling of the Church.
 - i. New ways of Church. The Anglican Church in Great Britain has started a movement: “Fresh Expressions” “Fresh Expressions encourages new forms of church for a fast changing world, working with Christians from a variety of denominations and traditions. The initiative has resulted in hundreds of new congregations being formed alongside more traditional churches.”²¹ Within our own Church congregations are looking at different ways of living as congregation. Small congregations changing into house churches, inner city congregations changing completely to cater for their new environment. “Think outside the box” is part of the “eager to learn”, being creative in the way that we live Church.
 - ii. Better ways of outreach. Personal contact is still the most effective way of outreach. The most credible witness to Christ is not an internationally acclaimed evangelist, but the colleague at work who convinces through her integrity, the friend in need, who is a friend indeed. We need to better integrate this outreach into our congregations - so that people can feel free to bring their friends to events, house groups etc.
Diaconal projects are springing up all over our Church. This is wonderful to observe! We can learn from each other in this regard.
 - iii. Vibrant congregations. Do we hold services, or celebrate them? Do we fulfill our duty in the congregation, or live out our gift and calling? Do we focus on preserving on what we have, or do we live out who we are? According to the latest statistics many congregations are experiencing a growth in service attendance. This is encouraging. In some congregations the buildings are a hub of activity, not only on Sundays, but also during the week. Vibrant does not mean that a few faithful work till they collapse, but that many people become involved in various ways.

²¹<http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/>

As we enter the sixth synod period of ELCSA N-T we look back at 30 years during which much has changed. The Church has shrunk from 15 000 to just over 8000 in 2005. Yet during the last 5 years it has grown back to almost 10000. Yet, so far we have not really managed to reach non-Christians. Most of those who joined the Church came from other Churches. (This is a serious problem in South Africa: Even the fast growing Charismatic Churches seem to “win” most of their members from other Churches. As long as we re-cycle Christians in stead of winning people for Christ, the Church of Christ is shrinking - even if some Churches are growing (at the expense of others)).

Most congregations have services in more than one language. Most of our pastors are South Africans - 30 years ago most came on contract from Germany. Where will we be 30 years from now?

I trust that we will be a Lutheran Church in close co-operation with many other Christian Churches, together reflecting the love of God into our society and far beyond.

Hundreds, perhaps thousand or more, of our members have emigrated to other countries. This will most probably continue. I pray that they will receive such a good foundation here in their home congregations, that they will be good ambassadors for Christ in their new home country and Church.

Many people will immigrate to South Africa in years to come. May our multicultural, multilingual Church become a home to many foreigners, helping them to settle in.

Will there still be various Lutheran Churches in South Africa? I don't know. Sometimes it seems as if unity is very close, at other times it seems impossible. But I pray that, even if there still is more than one Lutheran Church, they will co-operate and not compete with each other.

Here I stand - here we stand. We have journeyed together for 30 years as ELCSA (N-T). We have learnt a lot, and continue to learn. I am looking forward to the road that Christ will lead us and the other Churches in South Africa.

Group Discussions:

All groups:

- **Brief** round of sharing - what stood out for you? (Welche wichtige Anregung haben Sie gehört?)
- ELCSA (N-T) 30 years: what is special to you about our Church?
- What concerns/worries you about our Church?

Group 1: Faith and Theology.

- Where is Luther over-emphasised in our Church?
- Where should we study him more?

Group 2

- With which other Churches does your congregation have good co-operation?
- What have you learnt from other Churches that might be useful to us?
- Of which qualities can you think of our Church, that are good, limited to us?
- Which qualities of other Churches are good, but not for us?

Group 3

- Constant reformation: Can you think of obstacles - things that were once good, but now need to be changed?
- Have you ideas of what we can introduce to promote the spread of the Gospel?

Group 4

- Theological Training: What skills should a pastor have, and receive during training?
- What training should lay preachers receive?
- How could a syllabus for training pastors look? (Not details, but rough outline: How many years, how much theory and what, how much practical experience?)

Group 5

- God's creation: Share with each other from the areas of Agriculture and Science - positive examples of Christians being involved.
- Technology: What is your impression - how much should Church make use of new IT technologies? Do you have concrete suggestions?
- Harvest thanksgiving: What experiences or suggestions do you have, incorporating non-agricultural harvest?

Group 6

Education: What role can the Church play to make a difference in education in South Africa?

Group 7

- Personal development: Which of the three areas mentioned needs the most urgent

attention?

- What concrete suggestions do you have in this regard?

Group 8

The Church

- Think outside the box: What type of “fresh expressions” of Church have you encountered, heard about?
- Are there things in your congregation or community that might benefit from such “fresh expressions?”
- How vibrant is your congregation? What good tips can you share with others?