The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark
and the Lutheran World Federation

A Response from ELCD to Presentations by the General Secretary
and other staff members of LWF,
Geneva, Monday, November 17, 2014
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1. The Current Situation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark (ELCD)

The situation of the ELCD is affected by the transformation of society

- The continued urbanization leading to a weakening of rural communities
- The continuation of secularization and secularism in politics
- Combined with a return of religion and spirituality
- Globalization and immigration
- The change of the Danish society from having been one of the most homogenous societies in Europe in terms of religion, culture and ethnicity to a multiethnic and multireligious society

This transformation of society presents the ELCD for a number of challenges that the church deals with or will have to deal with. In that process the ELCD needs inspiration from other churches, within the Lutheran Communion, and the wide Christian fellowship of the World Council of Churches, while at the same time the ELCD will have experiences and inspiration to share with other churches.

In 2006 the ministry of church affairs issued a document (“Opgaver i sogn, provsti og stift” Betænkning 1477) that came into being after a committee work in which among others bishop Niels Henrik Arendt took part. The document included a statement on the purpose of the church, on which today there seems to a consensus within the ELCD.

“The mission of the ELCD as a Christian Church is to proclaim Christ as the savior of the world” And then it is added that this overarching goal should inform all that the church is doing. In this document and later documents from the ministry of church affairs we also find a list of the key task of the church, on which there is also a consensus on the church today:

- Worship services and ‘koinonia’
- Christian education and formation
- Diaconia and social work
- Mission and witness
Here I want to briefly present eight challenges that the ELCD is facing these years.

1. How to be the church in a post-Christendom society characterised at the same time by secularization and secularism AND multireligiousity and new spiritual movements?

2. How may the church better interact with the population, not only the 10-15 % that is in regular contact with a local church, but all the 78% that are members of the church, and even all 100% of the population?

3. How may the church be present and active in the rural areas where the church often is the last institution left?

4. How may the church develop its relations with the increasing number of migrant Christians and migrant churches? How to incorporate individual migrants in the local church? How to develop relationships with or even incorporate migrant churches in the ELCD? This is a new ecumenical challenge that makes ecumenism come close to local congregations.

5. How will the church relate to people of other faiths. How to understand the nature and practicalities of interfaith relations in general and mission in particular? Until recently mission was not part of the self-understanding of the official church but was at best relegated to the free Christian organisations (mission organisations) related with the ELCD., but now mission has come onto the agenda of the official church.

6. How will the church respond the the ecological challenges that become more and more visible to all and more and more urgent? A number of churches already have been involved in a project called ”Green Church”.

7. What is the responsibility of the church to international issues such as persecution of Christian i and other non-Christian minorities? How should the church respond the worst refugee situation in the world since the time immediately after the second world war, and in particular to those asylum seekers that come to our country? Does the church have a voice – through bishops, pastors, other individual Christians or groups – here? Should representatives of the church speak up or should church and political issues be kept apart?

8. Finally, what should be the relation of the ELCD to the government? Is there a need for a reform of the governing structure of the ELCD? At a regional LWF meeting in Rome a few weeks ago, a speaker from Sweden compared the Nordic Lutheran Churches and concluded that the ELCD was the church with the closes ties with the state Those of us from Denmark had to confirm this conclusion, and add that at this or other LWF or WCC meetings no representative from the ELCD – unlike representatives from almost all other churches - could not speak on behalf of the church in Denmark. Nobody can speak on behalf of the ELCD!

During the last two years a committee set up by the minister for church affairs has been
considering changes in the administrative and governing structures of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark. The committee included members representing various groups within the church and some politicians. It turned out that there was a consensus among the church representatives concerning some changes in the governing structures of ELCD. But since there was not broad support in the parliament for the very small reform proposed by the minister for church affairs, she decided not to go forward with the reform. This means that the governing church body on the national level, “national synod” so to speak, is still the parliament, and the executive powers in the church is still in the hands of the minister for church affairs. Or to put it differently, the ELCD does not have its own leadership organ on the national level. While we have no democratically elected synod, we do have democratically elected parish councils, and also on the level of the deanery and (with lesser powers) on diocese the church has its own councils.

This of courses is a problem or at least a serious challenge when considering the development of the church. On the other hand it may also involve positive elements. Development in the church does take place – and I would add many positive developments take place these years – and this is to a very large extent a bottom-up development, since we hardly have any central top from which a top-down development could be initiated.

2. Confessional Commitment of the ELCD

As a relatively large “Volkskirche” with about 78% of the population as its members – and with only fairly small non-Lutheran churches in Denmark, the ELCD may tend to focus on its own affairs and challenges without a strong perceived need for ecumenical cooperation, neither nationally, nor internationally. Therefore, ecumenical relations has not played a very prominent part in the life of our church.

The ELCD, however, has a fairly strong confessional, i.e. Lutheran, identity and commitment. Our relations to our Lutheran sister churches, first of all in our neighbouring countries, but also internationally, are important to us, at least on a leadership level.

As we approach the 500 years anniversary of the Lutheran reformation, which also will be commemorated in Denmark in many different ways, both on a national level and on the local level, we are reminded of the strong impact of Lutheranism on the development of the Danish society.

In our relations to Lutheran churches outside of Europe, however, the so-called free Lutheran organizations have played the greatest role. I here think of mission organizations and aid organizations – related to the ELCD.
3. ELCD and the World Wide Lutheran Communion

The commitment of ELCD to the Lutheran World Federation has form the foundation of LWF in 1947 always been strong and is also today very strong, but we must admit the our commitment has not been matched by our financial contribution to the LWF. Like any other member of the LWF we would of course like to pay our full membership fee. For this to happen, however, we depend on the decision of the politicians, in particular the minister of church affairs. We can assure you that we work hard to persuade the minister that we should increase or contribution to LWF, and if possible one day pay the full membership fee.

In the ELCD we see the LWF as very important communion. From the foundation of LWF aid work to refugees and other forms of diaconia, has played a crucial role and through Dan Church Aid we have been and are still deeply involved in the World Service of the LWF. Holistic ministry has always been a hallmark of LWF and of most of the Lutheran churches. While attending a regional LWF meeting in Rome a few weeks ago, I was deeply impressed by the refugee work carried out by the small – only 7000 strong – Italian Lutheran church which together with other protestant churches has established “Mediterranea Hope” on Lampedusa and Sicily to respond to the refugee catastrophe taking place while thousands of refugees try to cross the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe.

The work in the Department for Mission and Development (DMD) is also very important – and from partner churches of Lutheran mission organizations – we know that the support from DMD is strongly appreciated. LWF is also a very important forum for the discussion of theology from a Lutheran perspective. The many small and week Lutheran minority churches – which are found all continents – depend very much of the fellowship with and support from other Lutheran Churches in the Lutheran Communion and although we in the ELCD may not always perceive the need of what LWF offers we are committed to accompany our Lutheran sister churches. In that process I hope that we may also more and more realize our own need for the inspiration and support we may receive also from being in fellowship also with struggling minority churches.