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Declaration

Council of Seniors of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hungary

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DECLARATION

of the Council of Seniors of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hungary

- September 24, 1984 -

The Council of Seniors of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hungary has evaluated at its session of September 24, 1984, the events which took place at the Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in Budapest and the theological content and ramifications of those events. Concern was expressed about the open letter, which was written by Pastor Zoltan Doka from abroad and addressed the Presidency and the members of the Executive Committee, in which, he claims to disclose the internal situation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hungary.

The Council of Seniors maintains it to be improper and troublesome that this Pastor has publicized his false views to such a wide audience. He has thereby caused an unauthorized interference and challenge of internal matters of our church.

We hold this to be even more problematic because the contents of the letter are one-sided, erroneous and distorted. We protest against it because the letter's author represented himself as if he were speaking in the name of the Lutheran pastors of Hungary. On the grounds of our continual and direct contact with the pastor, and on the grounds of our visits and conversations with him, we declare the case to be that the letter attempts to paint a picture of our church which is false and distorted.

Since the themes of the letter are broad, we do not wish to go into all details -- for that one would need to make a special study -- we must emphatically denounce the particularly noticeable false statements.

1. Concerning the accusations against the theology of diaconia and its support by means of "terror," we find it necessary to state the following: The theology of diaconia is really a treasure of our church. Although its initiator was Bishop Dr. Zoltan Kaldy, all of the theology professors and clergy participated in its creation. We affirm that this theology is Christocentric, with the redemptive work of Christ in the middle, and it proclaims the cross of Christ as the greatest service. It is based on the belief that the crucifixion took place because Christ did not accept the messianic expectations of his time, but gave His life for the entire world.

Following from this, the life form of the church consists in the practice of love. This theology can be mixed with no other sort of ideology, not even Marxism. This theology proclaims the Gospel, declares that mission and evangelization are inseparable, but it performs also a critical service.

It was always possible for Zoltan Doka to distance himself from this theology; had he done this among us we would have conducted a debate with him in the spirit of the free exchange of ideas.

2. In addition to the attention given to the theology of diaconia, there is space in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hungary for studies in other theological directions, evaluating the appreciation and acceptance of their valuable aspects. The clergy are able to obtain various books by mail from all Western lands. They have at their disposal an extremely fine library. Also, the library of the Theological Academy makes accessible all standard theological works in various languages. These books are used, often and without restriction, in the course of the working sessions of the clergy, even though our clergy prefer to engage in the study of the theology of diaconia.

3. Our bi-annual journal Diakonia and our paper Lelkipasztor contain many articles on Barth, Brunner, Althaus, Tillich, Niebuhr, Bonhoeffer, etc. They also contain illustrations and extensive citations from their work.

4. Virtually all lectures of the Assemblies of the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation (Nairobi, Vancouver, and respectively, Helsinki, Evian, Dar es Salam) are published in our weekly newsletter Evangelikus Elet and in our pastor's newsletter, Lelkipasztor without change to the text. The church members can learn of these events, although significant parts of these, again, do not reflect the theology of diaconia. They are also discussed in the working sessions of the pastors. The same applies to the LWF Assembly in Dar es Salam, and, naturally, in Budapest. There are probably few churches of the W.C.C. which published all of the speeches throughout the 14 weeks of the VIth Assembly in Vancouver like our church did.

5. The development of various forms of piety in our church is also a proof of the free acceptance of different theological directions. The indictment of using "theological terror" is simply an invented lie.

6. In response to the accusation that Bishop Kaldy changes his tone when he is away from this homeland, many of the Seniors emphatically maintained

that, in their own experience, Bishop Kaldy always uses the same tone at home and abroad and is unequivocal in his meaning.

7. Relating to Bishop Kaldy's role and responsibility in the church press, the Seniors emphatically maintain that this is a self-evident task of the editors of all the publishers throughout the world. This work is done in our church by Bishop Kaldy as part of his office and always in consultation with the author.

Concerning the new hymnal, Pastor Doka also played an important role in its compilation. The new hymnal is the largest edition of our church, (with 60,000 copies in print) and further printings are planned. The parishioners throughout the land use it with joy and without hindrance, as is the case with the other publications of our press.

8. The accusation in the letter that our clergy are spiritually negligent, withdrawn, and timid is not true. Zoltan Kaldy indicates in his introductory speech as Bishop that the pastoral duties to the clergy are one of his most important tasks which are being exercised each day. The appointment book of the bishop's office indicates that he received 1,000 or more visitors annually in the previous years. Ninety percent of these visitors were clergy. This means that in the period of twenty five years he has held long discussions with clergy at least 20,000 times. Aside from this, he has visited all congregations in his church district two or three times, namely some ten or twenty times in the same quarter century. In each case he spoke directly and especially with the families of ministers.

Annually 25-30 married clergy couples, and diaconal co-workers, go to vacation resorts in other countries (such as East Germany, West Germany, Finland, Switzerland, Austria, and Denmark).

Every month, or at least every second month, working sessions of the clergy are held in all sixteen church districts. Not only theological questions are discussed, but the Seniors meet with the individuals, discussing the personal problems relating to their work as clergy. Often they visit with clergy families.

The charge that the clergy are despondent in the course of their ministerial services is groundless. They may be characterized as being rather strongly stimulated. Many perform their work in larger areas where members are dispersed which require traveling a long way. Here they may be holding

four or five services each Sunday. One of the most blessed opportunities of the ministerial work in our church is the visitation of the families. The clergy, depending on their energy, put this service to good use. There are clergy who visit all of their parishioners at least once a year.

9. As to the lowering of the theological level, we assert the following:

a) The ministers are trained in our theological academy, which is a church institution and does not belong to the state university. The same subjects are taught here as are taught by theological faculties in the West. One may also obtain a doctoral degree here.

b) There is also a three-year correspondence course for laymen, during which the students may remain in their "secular" positions but assist their parish rector on Sundays.

c) There exists the possibility for a scholarship abroad. We have approximately 90 clergy who were scholarship recipients for various lengths of time (in East Germany, West Germany, Finland, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, France, etc.).

d) Many theological professors of our church deliver guest lectures abroad (East Germany, Finland, Czechoslovakia, Austria), and from these one can ascertain the quality of our theological education.

e) The clergy, as we already have mentioned, gather every month, or every other month, and work to further their theological education where papers relating to current theological questions are read. The discussions following these lectures are quite lively. The papers and speeches are collected for the archives of the council and the church district. They are preserved for further theological research. Parts of these contributions are published in our church press.

f) Many theological books (at least 70 works) have appeared in the past twenty years which, for the most part, consist of biblical commentaries. We have plans to publish commentaries on all books of the New Testament and on part of the Old Testament.

g) We promoted theological studies prepared for the Assembly of the LWF (Helsinki, Evian, Dar es Salam and Budapest) in both the German and English languages. This work was made available each time for a study group of twenty clergy members. These studies also point to the theological standards of our church.

h) Our foreign scholarship recipients always report with great pleasure that they do not perceive of having been left behind in comparison to others but are able to compete well with their colleagues there.

10. Concerning the charge of dispersion and sectarianizing of the church community, the full assembly at Budapest witnessed that the opposite is true. Almost 900 guests have visited 114 of our congregations, following which they almost unanimously report with great pleasure that they met with a bustling congregation, comprised of active and joyous members. They are also convinced that there is active children, youth group and choir work. It would be absurd to be able to show so many members, just for show, if the situation were so bleak. Overall, the members of the church council like to perform their services. There is no "breaking down," but we are experiencing in our congregations -- despite obvious secularization -- a "condensation" and increasing home community life. The members belong to their congregation not because of being born into it but because of personal faith decisions and beliefs. These communities more frequently become participants in the Eucharist.

Dispersion can only be in the sense that almost 500,000 Lutheran believers live in approximately 2,000 towns, cities, villages, and farms -- among six million Roman Catholics and two million Reformed -- the Diaspora character of our existence goes back to the time of the Reformation. We experience with joy that attendance of divine service in these branch churches is the highest.

On the average, fourteen to forty percent of the church membership participate in Sunday church services, and this proportion is better than that of most Western churches. In many congregations there is religious instruction for children, and there are many where optional instruction takes place after attendance at state schools. A meaningful part of youth study is preparation for confirmation. The youth work in the congregations is the fruit of 5-6 days long youth conferences, i.e., evangelizations, for the entire church. These have been organized for years and have become very moving.

The LWF Assembly requested a large contribution of over U.S. \$200,000 from our church, the raising of which, along with the support of the congregation, was made possible only because the living faith and the generous love of church members stand behind the donation.

The danger of sects among us exists, but our members defend themselves consciously against it. The member churches of the Ecumenical Council (Baptists, Methodists, Adventists, etc.) do not, as a rule, engage in proselytism.

We consider that the LWF Assembly in Budapest gave the opportunity to our church to perform a meaningful service with regard to its content and message. It does not "preserve corruption" but rather gives new impulse and encouragement to the steady improvement of our service.

Our clergy, as in the past, strive with all their power to perform their normal duties relating to building the church community, and are both constant and faithful. Therefore, we protest and find it difficult to understand that someone in our name issues a distress call. We have always supported the brotherly community of the Lutherans of the world and receive their helpful support with heartfelt thanks, not as allegedly "corrupt", but as Christians genuinely bound together in living trust and in mature faith.

Our position was formulated at the Conference of the Council of Seniors which we have finally, with a secret ballot, approved unanimously.

Translated from German by
Barbara Limbert
Rosemont College, Rosemont, PA