

Guideline for Church Life in the NELCSA

This document was ratified and released for use in congregation by Synod
2019

Amended by Dieter Klee, Almut Buhr and Udo Lütge – October 2019

Synod 2005 resolved that “(i) the rules governing Church Life are no longer subject to the provisions of section 57(1) of the Constitution of NELCSA. (ii) The General Pastors’ Convention, the Ecclesiastical Council and Church Council are charged with reviewing and amending these from time to time. (iii) Any amendments agreed upon are subject to ratification by Church Synod.”

A team consisting of Ms Almut Buhr, Pastors Dieter Klee and Udo Lütge, was tasked to re-work the Order of Church life. The team has rewritten the order.

Synod is requested to receive this document, ratify it and release it for use in the congregations. As indicated in the motion adopted by Synod 2005, the reviewing is an ongoing process. Therefore, further amendments will be made in future, as and when necessary.

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GUIDELINE FOR CHURCH LIFE IN THE NORTHEASTERN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN SOUTH AFRICA

This Guideline for Church Life in the Northeastern Evangelical Lutheran Church in South Africa [NELCSA] is to serve as a resource for congregations and members to help provide orientation. Congregants and those considering membership may use it as an aid to understand structures, fellowship and practices in our church. It should serve as an introduction to practices in our church with regards to worship, congregational life and responsibility towards the world.

This guideline is based on the Lutheran Confessions and forms part of the Orders of our Church but is not to be understood legalistically. Rather, it is extended to the reader, in the tradition of evangelical freedom. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the source and foundation of faith and life, as they are depicted in this guideline. In compiling this guideline, we are aware that we describe the current general practices of our church based on our understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, while recognising that the ongoing interaction between the Gospel and us and the world we live in may – and even should – constantly lead to new insights and expressions of the Christian life.

1. Baptism

1.1 The Institution of Baptism

Our Lord Jesus Christ himself instituted Christian Baptism with the words of the Great Commission:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt. 28:18-20).

1.2 The Promise of Baptism

The Sacrament of Baptism stands under the promise of our Lord Jesus Christ, who said: "He who believes and is baptised will be saved" (Mark 16:16a). Faith and Baptism belong together. The importance of faith is emphasised by Paul when he writes: "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Galatians 3:26-27). We are given the joy of life from Baptism and faith (consider the chamberlain of Queen Candace in Acts 8:39: "...and he went on his way rejoicing.").

1.3 The Gift of Baptism

God himself acts in Baptism by granting us his mercy and new life through rebirth - "He saved us through the washing of rebirth (Baptism) and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). Jesus Christ earned this new life through his death and resurrection. In Baptism the Holy Spirit places us under the Lordship of Christ. Baptised Christians therefore no longer belong to themselves, the world nor death but rather to the living Lord to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given. The saving act of Jesus Christ has broken the power of sin¹.

¹ This power of sin is called "Original Sin" in the English tradition, while the German tradition uses the word "Erbsünde" (inherited sin). These terms are not in themselves biblical, and sometimes carry unfortunate biological connotations. The intention is to express the reality into which we are born as human beings. It is a situation which is characterized by sin and guilt. From birth, a human being is already placed in a world filled with egotism, prejudice, indifference, lovelessness, oppression etc. This is a world where human beings are in rebellion against God and turn away from Him. The life of an individual is a part of this reality and is inseparably interwoven with it. This "inherited" situation (in which one always already finds oneself) disturbs the relationship with God and with fellow human beings. Original Sin is not a "biologically inherited" defect. Baptism is not some "magical" medication against such a defect. Through Baptism and faith, we are freed from the power of sin and incorporated into the

Through Baptism and faith, we too can overcome sin and are incorporated into the Holy Christian Church, the Body of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 12:13: "For by one Spirit we were all baptised into one body."). Therefore, Baptism cannot be repeated². Baptism unites us with all Christians.

1.4 Infant Baptism

Although Baptism is not dependent on any particular age, NELCSA practises infant Baptism on biblical and theological grounds. The Baptism of infants emphasises that our eternal salvation does not depend on our deeds but rather on that which God has done. Baptism requires us to respond to God in faith. Therefore, parents, godparents and the congregation together accept responsibility to help the child grow in faith and nurture love, commitment and fellowship within the congregation. Parents who wish to have their child baptised, should arrange this with the pastor in good time. In meetings with parents, and if possible, also with godparents, the Pastor explores the meaning and purpose of Baptism and the responsibilities it lays on us.

1.5 Postponement of Baptism

Generally, infants are baptised in our church. Parents may also choose to postpone the Baptism of their child. Such a request should be dealt with in pastoral responsibility by the pastor. The child may receive a blessing, using the liturgy recognised by the church. This blessing is not to be seen as an alternative to the Sacrament of Baptism [General Pastors' Convention 2004]. Only baptised people are members of a congregation and may participate in Holy Communion.

1.6 Adult Baptism

Regardless of the age at which Baptism occurs, it remains true that our eternal salvation does not depend on our deeds but on that which God has done. Before baptising a young person or an adult, they should be instructed in the Christian faith thoroughly. If unbaptised young persons participate in Confirmation classes, their Baptism usually takes place during the Confirmation service. As the baptisands affirm their faith personally, no Confirmation is necessary.

1.7 Baptismal Service

A Baptism takes place during the divine service in the church. The Baptism of an infant may be followed by a prayer of thanksgiving and the blessing of the parents.

1.8 Emergency Baptism

Any Christian may baptise someone who is in danger of dying. Such a Baptism presupposes the consent of the baptisand or those responsible for him/her³. Should a Baptism not have been possible, the next of kin should be assured that this unbaptised person who died is embraced by the love and grace of God.

1.9 Godparents

Godparents are witnesses to the Baptism. They confess the creed with the parents and the congregation during the baptismal Service. They continue to intercede for the child in prayer.

rule of Jesus Christ. The believer receives power from God to overcome sin through Christ's acceptance, forgiveness and renewal. In this sense, we as Christians always live simultaneously as righteous and sinners (*simul iustus et peccator*; M. Luther). This means that, although we continue to be sinners, we receive the righteousness of Christ, achieved by his sacrifice on the cross, through faith in Him.

² We do not condemn members who have allowed themselves to be "rebaptised." However, through pastoral discussion, we endeavour to show them the validity of their original Baptism and to help them treasure it.

³ A Baptism is administered with the following words: "N.N. (Name), I baptise you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Thereby water is poured onto the head of the baptisand three times. The Creed and the Lord's Prayer should conclude the baptismal act. Such a Baptism has to be reported to the responsible Pastor as soon as possible, together with the names of the witnesses and/or godparents.

They promise, on behalf of the congregation, to help the child remain in Christ and His congregation. They ensure that those responsible give the child a Christian upbringing and accompany parents and child through caring involvement. Every confirmed member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church may practice the office of godparent. Members of other Christian denominations may also be godparents with the permission of their respective denominations. At least one of the godparents should be a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Persons may not be a godparent if they:

- a) do not belong to a Christian Church;
- b) publicly cause offence to the congregation; or
- c) reject infant baptism.

Godparents who cannot attend the baptismal Service may be represented by a witness.

1.10 Deferral of Baptism

The Baptism of an infant may be deferred if parents and godparents refuse to actively live as Christians, do not participate in congregational life, or decline to accept the commitment towards a Christian upbringing.

1.11 Remembrance of Baptism

We want to seek ways to strengthen our members to live their lives based on the promise of Baptism. We further want to assist and encourage Christians to appreciate their Baptism. This could, for instance, be done by celebrating the anniversary of Baptism, baptismal remembrance Services and creating opportunities for public witnessing.

2. Worship Service

2.1 The Significance of the Worship Service

The Worship Service celebrated every Sunday remains the focal point of congregational life. In Word and Sacrament, the risen Lord works in His Congregation, forgiving and equipping participants. Certain of the presence of her Lord ("Where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." Matthew 18:20), the congregation responds through praise, worship, intercession and the use of their gifts. Through participation in the Service we profess our part in Christ and in the 'communion of the faithful' called together by the Holy Spirit.

2.2 Parts of the Service

Worship Services in our church are celebrated in rich diversity and we are free to explore different ways of giving praise and honour to the Triune God.

As Evangelical Lutheran Church we use the following basic order:

- 1) Opening and Supplication
- 2) Proclamation and Creed
- 3) Holy Communion
- 4) Sending and Blessing.

The congregation gathers in the recognition that she needs God's grace and voices her gratitude for this grace received. This is expressed through hymns, psalms and prayer. In the creed, spoken together, the Body of Christ is constituted as the congregation professes the Triune God with all the faithful on earth. The congregation hears what God has done for her and what God expects from her through the prescribed readings and the sermon. Intercession is an important part of the Service in which we follow the encouragement of God's Word to pray for others, for rulers and governments, for the Church, for the sick and needy and for all those who need it. In the Sacrament of Holy Communion, the good news of grace is received in visible form and the congregation already partakes in the glory of her Lord. The Lord's Prayer encompasses all prayer and once again connects the congregation to all Christians on

earth. The blessing assures the gathered believers that they are in God's hands – equipped for service, they are sent out under God's blessing into the world to fulfil their calling.

A variety of liturgical forms can be used to celebrate a Worship Service. The musical accompaniment should give space to various styles, from traditional to modern, making use of a range of musical material and traditions to proclaim the Word of God in different contexts.

2.3 Sunday Service

The main Service of the week generally takes place on a Sunday morning in remembrance of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. However, current social developments may call for alternative models to be considered. The increased work commitments of many Christians, including over weekends, and the flexible leisure culture has led to Sunday Service attendance waning.

2.4 Participation

The regular attendance of the weekly Worship Service ought to be close to the Christian's heart and not a tedious chore or misunderstood as fulfilment of duty. The joy of encountering the Living Lord and experiencing fellowship with brothers and sisters in Christ should be enough encouragement.

2.5 The Worship Space

Usually Services take place in a dedicated church. However, our Lord Jesus Christ promised that "where two or three gather in my name, there I am with them" (Matthew 18:20). Any appropriate space can therefore be used for a Worship Service, including halls, homes, open air and other spaces.

Generally, the worship space is set up to aid the message being proclaimed. Traditionally it includes the elements described below. The pulpit and/or lectern, the baptismal font and the altar point to the gifts of the Lord in Word and Sacrament. The Cross – symbol of judgement and mercy – binds the believer to God and to his or her neighbour. Generally, the worship space includes both the crucifix and the empty cross to point to the truth and meaning of the death and resurrection of our Lord. The flowers on the altar point to the 1st Article of the creed as we acknowledge God the Creator. The open Bible points to the 2nd Article as we acknowledge Christ the Incarnate and Living Word of God. The candles point to the 3rd Article; they symbolise the Holy Spirit and are an illustration of how Christ sent his disciples to be the light of the world through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Christian Worship Service is to be understood as a public event. The bells therefore announce the invitation to all people. Images, symbols and paraments (altar and pulpit cloth) make the Christian message visible. The Congregation expresses her gratitude for grace received through the thank offering and thereby also expresses her responsibility to congregation and world.

2.6 Important Aspects of the Service

The Service is a celebration of the congregation. In general, it is led by an ordained pastor. However, in accordance with the statutes of our church, a lay preacher or lay reader may also lead the Service. Such lay-led Services have the same value as one led by an ordained pastor. The congregation takes part through singing, music, readings, prayers and various other interactions.

The congregation is encouraged to make use of different Service forms, depending on the situation and target group (youth, seniors, families, different preferences, etc.). The dignity and value of the Service is primarily determined by its faithful witness to the Gospel message, and not by its form.

During the time of Lent the suffering and death of Our Lord are especially commemorated.

2.7 Children's Church

Proclaiming the good news to its children and teaching them is an important task of the congregation. Here children's church plays a central role. It communicates the truth of the Gospel to children in an age-appropriate manner. The children can be called to the front during the Service for a message, prayer and/or blessing before leaving for children's church. When the Service includes Holy Communion, they can be led back into the church in good time to be able to participate, should their parents wish them to (see section 3.6).

2.8 Groups and Ministries in the Congregation

The congregation may organise itself into various groups and ministries to fulfil its tasks. Some of these groups are aimed at worship and growth in knowledge and understanding of the Gospel. Weekly or monthly home groups, as well as prayer and study groups deepen and strengthen the faith of Christians and equip them for service in their daily lives.

2.9 Daily Devotion

According to the Apostle Paul, the entire life of a Christian ought to be their "true and proper worship" (Romans 12:1-3). Daily reading of the Bible, devotionals, as well as the use of hymn books, the catechisms, Christian calendars or 'Bible Apps' all serve to support a life of worship and contribute to deeper knowledge, understanding and growth of the Christian faith. Congregants should be encouraged to make use of these.

3. Holy Communion

3.1 Institution of Holy Communion

Jesus Christ instituted Holy Communion and commanded his disciples to celebrate this meal in remembrance of Him: "Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night in which he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples and said, 'Take and eat, this is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way after the supper he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them and said, 'All of you, drink of it; this cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'" (compiled from Matthew 26; Mark 14; Luke 22; 1 Corinthians 11)

3.2 The Promise of Holy Communion

As promised by our Lord, forgiveness of sins, life and salvation are given to us in this Sacrament. This gift is "a comfort to the afflicted, a remedy for the sick, life for the dying, food for the hungry and a rich treasure for all the poor and needy" (Martin Luther).

3.3 The Gift of Holy Communion

Christ gave himself as a unique and unrepeatable sacrifice, once for all on the cross. In Holy Communion Christ gives himself to us, "In, with and under" both elements, bread and wine or grape juice, by means of his body and blood, being truly present in the sacrament of Holy Communion and distributed and received in faith, without our fully comprehending this holy mystery.

3.4 Fellowship in Holy Communion

As Jesus of Nazareth shared a table with sinners, so the crucified, risen and glorified Christ shares fellowship (has communion) with the members of His Congregation, who are *simul iustus et peccator* (righteous and sinner at the same time). Through Holy Communion, the Lord also unites the members towards mutual forgiveness, true love and brotherly and sisterly fellowship. He strengthens them in trouble and temptation and allows them to look forward to his return in joyful anticipation.

3.5 Invitation to Holy Communion

Whether filled with gratitude or oppressed by guilt, we as baptised members of the Body of Christ, receive Holy Communion gladly and regularly. For it is the Lord who invites us all: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me” (Revelation 3:20).

3.6 The Practice of Holy Communion

Generally, Holy Communion is celebrated during the Worship Service of the congregation. The prerequisite for participation in Holy Communion is Baptism and not Confirmation. With the parents’ and pastor’s agreement, baptised children may participate in Holy Communion. Alternatively, they may receive a blessing with laying on of hands.

A Confessional Service before the Holy Communion Service or a confessional part within the Service can be a meaningful element in preparing for Holy Communion, as can a prior discussion with the pastor.

In the case of persons too sick or weak to attend the Worship Service, Holy Communion may be administered at home or in the care facility (e.g. hospital, retirement home, etc.). In these cases, family members may also be invited to partake. The celebration of this Sacrament in contexts other than the above (e.g. Wedding Service, Home Group or Bible Study) should be based on a particular spiritual motivation and the consent of the pastor and/or congregational council.

3.7 Holy Communion and Ecumenism

The fellowship of Holy Communion is always an expression of the fellowship of the Church as it represents the ‘Body of Christ’. Prerequisite for participation are Baptism and child-like trust in the words: my body given for you, my blood shed for you for the forgiveness of sin.

4. Confession

4.1 The Commission to Forgive

The good news of the forgiveness of sins is a great treasure of the Church. Where forgiveness of sins is proclaimed the soul breathes a sigh of relief. God has not only instituted the Sacraments and the office of preaching, but also established the ‘Office of the Keys’ – He has granted full authority to His congregation to forgive and to retain sins through the power of the Holy Spirit⁴. He has not granted this treasure solely to the pastor but to every responsible Christian.

4.2 Confession of Sin

Unforgiven guilt destroys fellowship with God and the neighbour. With the parable of the prodigal son, Jesus teaches us that God is a forgiving father and encourages repentance and renewed fellowship with God and our brothers and sisters. The path to this new fellowship is offered through the confession of sin.

4.3 Admission of Sin

Confession places the acknowledgement of being a sinner into the foreground. Turning to the Father goes hand in hand with the admission of sin.

⁴ “If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” (Matthew 18:15-18)

4.4 The Practice of Confession

In our Church, the act of confession is generally practiced in communal confession⁵. In doing this we can draw from our own rich tradition, as well as from other resources (e.g. Taizé). Traditionally communal confession usually comprises of the following:

- a) the Confessional Prayer – in which the Christian confesses their sin as a sinner among sinners;
- b) the public professing of this Confessional Prayer through the unequivocal answering of the confessional questions; and
- c) Absolution.

5. Youth Ministry in the Congregation

5.1 Children's Ministry

The congregation has a responsibility towards its children and their spiritual growth and education. This responsibility rests first and foremost with parents and godparents. Parents are the primary source of a Christian upbringing and should equip their children for a life of faith. Godparents have an opportunity to relate to their godchildren in a way that is often not possible for parents; this gives them a wonderful opportunity to be a mentor who supports and guides them. The congregation promotes all this by equipping parents and godparents for their important role and by having a children's ministry that contributes to the spiritual growth and education of the children.

5.1.1 Children's Church

One opportunity to fulfil this responsibility is available every Sunday. The congregation should ensure that a relevant and up-building children's church programme is offered, through which the Gospel is proclaimed and fellowship experienced. Children (and their families) are to be encouraged to attend Sunday Services regularly. Opportunities should be created to show that children are an important part of the congregation, for example, by including them in the Sunday Service, music ministry, etc.

5.1.2 Religious Education

The congregation should offer Christian education to children. Where a congregation has an own school or the pastor teaches at a school, a unique opportunity to offer such education – and positively impact children – is available. Where this is not the case, other opportunities for Christian education should be created. This important ministry should aim to increase knowledge of the Bible and other main Christian topics and encourage reflection on life, social, environmental and other important issues.

5.2 Confirmation

Confirmation is an opportunity to give a public witness. It is formally understood as the personal public confirmation of the confession made at Baptism by parents and godparents. It includes blessing the confirmands. The right to become a godparent is conferred with Confirmation⁶.

⁵ Along with public confession, private confession (the blessings of which were appreciated by Martin Luther) is also possible. Whoever turns to the pastor to unburden themselves of sin shall know that through their Ordination Vow the pastor may not – even in a court of law – break the confessional seal of confidentiality. In keeping with the priesthood of all believers, any member of the congregation may offer this service to their fellow Christian. Such personal conversations can therefore also take place with a trusted congregant. All believers may declare the forgiveness of sins.

⁶ In the case of a self-expressed desire for Baptism where a Confirmation is no longer required, the right to become a godparent is conferred with the Baptism.

5.2.1 Confirmation Classes

Confirmation classes are offered in preparation for the Confirmation. Formally, such classes are viewed as baptismal instruction in obedience to Christ's command to baptise and "**teach** them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19). As such these classes are a partial fulfilment of the promise of parents, godparents and congregation made at infant Baptisms to raise the child in the Christian faith. Such classes should include teaching about:

- salvation in Jesus Christ and the importance of the cross and Christ's death and resurrection;
- the Triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit;
- the Word of God, the Bible, Word and Sacrament and the proclamation of the Word;
- the Church; and
- prayer and other practical aspects of faith.

Such classes aim to equip confirmands to confess and live out their faith in the Triune God.

5.2.2 Confirmands and the Congregation

During their time as confirmands, participants should be introduced to and included in various aspects of congregational life, including Worship Services. It is an ideal time to get to know the congregation and its practices more intimately.

5.2.3 Registration for Confirmation

The generally accepted age for registration of a confirmand is decided by the congregation, but remains flexible, as the needs and preferences of individual confirmands are considered. Newly registered confirmands should be introduced to the congregation. Intercession on behalf of confirmands should be encouraged.

5.2.4 Presentation of Confirmands

Towards the end of the time as confirmands, they are presented to the congregation in a Worship Service. In this Service they have the opportunity to express their faith and share what they have learnt with the congregation.

5.2.5 Postponement of Confirmation

In exceptional circumstances, the pastor may, in consultation with the parents and the congregational council, postpone the Confirmation of a confirmand with the aim of strengthening a personal faith decision. In such cases a pastoral discussion should take place with the confirmand and the parents.

5.3 Youth Ministry

The congregation has a responsibility towards its young people – they are an important part of the Church. It should promote a relevant and active youth ministry that accompanies and guides these young people through the joys and challenges of faith and life. Such a ministry should include young people in the life of the congregation, while also creating space to meet their unique needs in a relevant way. It should address the areas of fellowship, teaching and participation in congregational life. As such, the youth should be involved in all aspects of church life according to their gifts, including proclamation (e.g. reading and preaching in Worship Services, helping in children's church, etc.), music ministries and diaconical work. Regional youth ministry structures are one resource that can assist in all this.

5.4 Young Adults

The Lutheran World Federation formally defines "Youth" as all those under 30 years of age. In recognition of the varying needs across this broad spectrum of age groups, congregations are encouraged to consider the specific needs of young adults (generally the age group 18-30) and to minister to them in a relevant way that equips them to deal with the unique challenges

they face and to live a life of faith, while encouraging them to be active members of the congregation.

There should be enough points of contact between a young adult and a youth ministry to enable these different age groups to learn from each other and to recognise the benefits of fellowship beyond just their own age group.

5.5 Intergenerational Ministry

It remains important that all these specific ministries do not create separation within the congregation between different groups and generations. Congregations are therefore also encouraged to identify ways to promote intergenerational activities and ministries that promote fellowship between all members.

6. Church Wedding and Christian Marriage

6.1 Marriage

In the Bible we read of the origin of marriage: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24)⁷. Thus, marriage unites man and woman in a bond that should not be broken and within which they love and assist one another. Married people are responsible before God for their lives together. They stand together in faithfulness and live out the mutual forgiveness that allows them to make a fresh start again and again. In this sense the Christian congregation should serve as a space where marriage can flourish while also protecting those whose marriages have failed as an expression of the evangelical understanding of the Body of Christ.

6.2 Marriage Preparation

Marriage preparation discussions or courses are held with the couple that is to be married by the pastor. These discussions are aimed at helping the couple to consider such issues as matters of faith, family and love in order to prepare them and help them establish a basis for their life together. Furthermore, the couple should discuss whether they agree on practical and spiritual matters.

6.3 Church Wedding

The engaged couple register their request for a church wedding with the pastor timeously. If the pastor conducting the wedding is not the pastor of the congregation that either one of the couple belong to, the pastor of their congregation should be informed. Sometimes, the pastor is also the marriage officer. If not, the couple must present the certificate of civil marriage.

6.4 Wedding as a Worship Service

Weddings are public Worship Services that include the proclamation of God's Word, vows of fidelity and the blessing. The pastors of the NELCSA discourage weddings from being held during Holy Week and over the Easter Weekend.

6.5 Withholding of a Church Wedding

The church wedding only proceeds in accordance with the 'legal' marriage. The pastor is to determine whether the couple have met the legal requirements.

The wedding ceremony can be withheld if:

- a) neither bride nor groom belong to a Christian church;
- b) a marriage ceremony presided over by an officeholder of a different Christian denomination, a different religion or religious community has taken place or is to take place.

⁷ Today the biblical Christian concept of marriage is confronted by a series of challenges and demands as a result of the ongoing changes in society. 'Same-sex partnerships' and the rising number of non-matrimonial ways of living together require intensive discussions in the church.

6.6 Marriage of Divorcees

Church marriage of a divorced person is allowed. It should be encouraged that the person reflects on the failure of their first marriage before committing to a new marriage, recognising the significance of forgiveness and, where relevant, also dealing with guilt.

6.7 Wedding Anniversaries

Wedding anniversaries may be celebrated as special Services at home or in church.

7. Death and Burial

7.1 Death and Resurrection

Dying and the experience of death are part of the reality of human life. The Christian Congregation lives by the power of the resurrection of her Lord. She should be a place of hope and comfort for all who are confronted by the experience of the dying or sudden death of a loved one. Christ has taken the power from death and grants new life. Through the hope of resurrection death for a Christian becomes the entry into eternal life. In the face of mortality and death the Church proclaims the resurrection and the reality of a new life in Christ. This message of hope is conveyed to the living. God can grant the dying a peaceful death and the grieving comfort. The good news of hope is central to the Lutheran funeral and not the honour or merit of the deceased.

Only the faithfulness of God carries us in life and death. Therefore, the gospel of God's grace and faithfulness should be gratefully accepted in this life.

To Christians in distress about the salvation of departed loved ones (be it on the grounds of their dying unbaptised, having lived separated from the church or having died by their own hand) the church testifies that we can entrust our loved ones to God's love and grace.

7.2 Life in Preparation for Death

Discussion of death and dying is part of a Christian's life and of the pastoral care for the dying. It is also from time to time a necessary theme of the Sunday sermon. Through partaking in Holy Communion, the dying Christian may be reassured of God's forgiveness and mercy and may thus prepare themselves for death.

7.3 Funeral Service

Funerals and burials are a Worship Service and to be understood as a service to the living. In the case of cremation, the pastor or a councillor may be present at the crematorium. If the ashes are interred at a later date, this may be done by the pastor or a councillor. A church funeral is, as a rule, only provided for members, however, exceptions may be made on pastoral grounds. The decision is to be taken by the pastor, in consultation with the congregational council. Children who have passed away before Baptism are granted a church funeral.

7.4 Withholding of Church Funeral

A church funeral may be refused if the deceased has publically rejected or reviled the faith or where the family demand a form of funeral that contravenes the practice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. The decision lies with the pastor, in consultation with the congregational council.

8. Membership of Church and Congregation

8.1 Being a Member of the One Holy Christian Church

Since we are taken up into the Body of Christ through Baptism ("We were all baptised by one Spirit so as to form one body." 1 Corinthians 12:13), it is through Baptism that we become a member of the One Holy Christian Church. Baptism shows us God's abundant grace – He has unconditionally accepted us in His fellowship as His children.

8.2 Membership of the Congregation

Membership is open to all persons who wish to live out their Christian Faith within a Lutheran community of faith. As a church, we do not discriminate on the basis of race, culture, gender, citizenship or social status. The unbaptised become members of our church upon their Baptism in it. Christians from other congregations of Evangelical Lutheran Churches are admitted as members of our church by a letter of transfer – if such new members are from churches other than the NELCSA, they are still required to fill in an application form. Baptised Christians from other denominations who wish to become members of our church, do so by means of a membership application form. The congregational council decides on the application. It should be verified whether the applicant has been baptised. As soon as membership is conferred, they receive the right to all services of the church.

Due to the laws of our country, a distinction must be made between general membership (belonging to the Body of Christ) and membership in a legal sense (belonging to the specific legal entity of the congregation with a right to vote). This distinction is set out in the Congregational Code.

8.3 Instruction of New Members

The Congregational Code of the NELCSA emphasises that it is important that new members receive a copy of the Congregational Code and the Guideline for Church Life. They are to express adherence to the constitution and to the order of the church. It is also encouraged that new members receive instruction in the teachings of our church. Such instruction may take place on an individual or group basis. A new member, even if they are over the general age of Confirmation, may also choose to be confirmed.

8.4 Rights and Responsibilities of Members

Members of a congregation have the following rights:

- a) they have the right to receive all official services of the church;
- b) confirmed members may become a godparent at Baptism;
- c) they have the right to vote and to be elected at the General Meeting if they are 18 years or older.

Individual congregations may confer further rights, such as the use of congregational facilities, the right to be buried on the congregational cemetery, etc.

Members also have the following responsibilities:

- a) they are called to follow their Lord and to participate in the communion of believers through Word and Sacrament;
- b) they contribute to the life and growth of the congregation and church by participating and contributing according to their talents;
- c) they fulfil their financial obligations according to the regulations of the Congregational Code and the decisions of the General Meeting and Congregational Council.

In exceptional circumstances, Congregational Council has the authority to revoke the rights of members to vote if they fail to fulfil their duties.

8.5 Termination of Membership

A member may choose to terminate their membership. This is done by means of a letter of resignation.

8.6 Re-admittance

People whose membership has been terminated can be re-admitted as members. The pastor should assist applicants for re-admittance by accompanying them in pastoral care.

9. Mission, Offices and Structure of Congregation and Church

9.1 Mission of the Congregation

The congregation as the Body of Christ in its local area carries the responsibility for the proclamation of God's Word and the administering of the Sacraments in accordance with the Gospel. The congregation is to ensure that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is witnessed through doctrine, life and order of the church. It is tasked with missionary service and is aware of its ecumenical responsibility.

The local congregation strengthens individual members for service to their neighbours, in their family and at work, in private life and in the public sphere. It knows itself responsible for the growth of its members in the knowledge of their faith so that they may learn to witness to the hope that is in Christ. Under the leadership of pastor and council, the congregation ensures that the structure of congregational life is in accordance with the Gospel.

All offices of the church discussed below are open to any member who fulfils the criteria for that particular office.

9.2 The Pastor

Our Lord Jesus Christ granted His congregation the office that preaches reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-20a – "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us."). As ordained servant of the Word and shepherd of the congregation, the pastor is charged with the proclamation of the uncorrupted Gospel of Jesus Christ in the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments. This responsibility to witness is also shown through religious education and pastoral care: in house visits, visiting the sick and troubled with comforting and cautionary words. In line with Luther's 'priesthood of all believers' any Christian may perform these services. To preach the Word and administer the Sacraments, lay people must be properly appointed by the church to do so. They are also bound by the statutes of the Church.

9.3 Other Offices and Ministries

Other congregational offices supplement the task of public testimony.

- a) church and congregation call members to help with proclamation, pastoral care and other ministries;
- b) members called to ministries and responsibilities are inducted and/or blessed during a Worship Service;
- c) they do their duty in close co-operation with the pastor and, as a rule, without financial reward. All individual ministries in the congregation have the same goal, namely that the Word of God deepens faith, awakens love and builds community.

9.4 The Relationship between Pastor and Congregation

- a) In proclamation and pastoral care, the pastor serves the whole congregation.
- b) The members of the congregation assist the pastor with their advice and all manner of support, as they do one to another.
- c) The congregation is not the master of the pastor and the pastor is not the master of the congregation. Both are under the Word of God. They ought to pray for each other and approach each other in love and respect, that each may do their duty gladly.
- d) The pastor shares the leadership of the congregation with the congregational council as laid out in the Congregational Code and the Law on Pastors of the NELCSA.

9.5 Congregational Council

Every congregation has a council where the pastor and the councillors together lead the congregation. Council comprises of:

- a) the pastor/s and, where applicable, the intern/s called to minister to the congregation;
- b) the councillors elected to council according to the rules of the church;
- c) co-opted individual/s when necessary.

9.6 Congregation

The Church of Jesus Christ manifests itself locally in the form of the congregation. The congregation manages its affairs bound by Scripture and profession of faith within the bounds of the constitution of the NELCSA and Church Law, and also within the laws of the land, as it is seen as a legal entity by the State. The congregation is solely responsible for fulfilling this task.

The congregation's highest decision-making body is the General Meeting that provides the elected council with its mandate to manage the affairs of the congregation. The congregation participates in the life of the church and, through its elected delegates to Synod, is also part of the leadership of the church. It recognises the regulations of the church.

9.7 Circuits

The NELCSA is divided into circuits headed by a Dean. The circuit serves to facilitate co-operation between member congregations (their works and ministries) to further the completion of common tasks. The Dean leads the circuit in tasks and ministries together with the Circuit Council. He or she implements the decisions of the Circuit Council. The Dean also advises Church Council and the Ecclesiastical Council on matters concerning the circuit.

9.8 Leadership of the Church

The leadership organs of the NELCSA are:

- a) Church Synod
- b) Bishop
- c) Church Council.

The leadership organs are responsible for ensuring that the NELCSA fulfils its mission and preserves its unity and freedom in doctrine and life, propagation of faith and pastoral care, order and administration. The church leadership organs are supported by the Ecclesiastical Council.

1. The leadership of the church watches over the scripturally and confessional compliant proclamation, gathering and sending (mission) of the congregations.
2. Likewise it watches over the regulation and order, supervision and administration of the congregations.
3. It is responsible for the appropriate dissemination of material.
4. It ensures the theological training and continuing education, calling and discharge of duties of pastors and ecclesiastical co-workers.
5. It ordains pastors and carries out visitations of the congregations.

9.9 Ministry of the Church

The NELCSA is tasked with the ministry of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in Word and Sacrament, fellowship in prayer and Christian discipleship, the fulfilment of the Great Commission, the professing of faith in the public realm, the service of love and, finally, Christian upbringing and education.

9.10 Co-operation with other Churches

The NELCSA actively works towards unity within the One Church of Jesus Christ throughout the world. It is a member of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (UELCSA) and belongs to the Lutheran Community in Southern Africa (LUCSA) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF). As a church of the Evangelical Lutheran Confession it is bound together with the Lutheran Churches in South Africa and throughout the world. It is also a member South African Council of Churches (SACC). It takes part in the co-operative work of churches in Southern Africa and worldwide.

10. Church in the World

10.1 The Lord and His Church

The congregation is the Body of Christ; in Christ the Body is unified. Every member receives from Him its particular task of ministry in the world. The Body of Christ is manifest on a small scale when two or three gather in His Name and on a greater scale when the church considers the worldwide ministry of her Lord.

The church has her place in the world. She expresses her solidarity with people marked by need, misery or sin and stands with them. As a fellowship of justified sinners, she follows the commands of her Lord to find and save that which is lost (see Luke 19:10 – “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”).

10.2 Equipped for Ministry

The Holy Spirit enlightens believers with His gifts⁸. The Christian is prepared and equipped for ministry in the world through the Worship Service, weekly events, as well as prayer, Home and Bible Study groups. Members of the congregation have different talents and thus different tasks (see 8.4 and 9.1). It is for this reason that the individual members are dependent on one another. Each should serve the other with the gifts they have received. As steward of the gifts of God the Christian uses the talents and resources they have been entrusted with in the service of God and their neighbour⁹. This includes both time and possessions.

10.3 Priesthood of all Believers

Every Christian is a witness to their Lord and His Gospel wherever they are: in marriage and within the family, at work and in the public arena and even during leisure time. Within the Church they each carry a responsibility for the proclamation of the uncorrupted Gospel of Jesus Christ in the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments. The concept of the ‘Priesthood of All Believers’ also means that, under certain circumstances, lay people may be called to preach the Word or to take their place in church leadership. Beyond the Church they have the same responsibility and their way of life and conduct towards other people testify to the credibility of their Christianity even when, and precisely because, their surrounding culture no longer takes God into account and in an environment where church attendance is on the wane.

10.4 Diaconical Ministry

The diaconical ministry (with Jesus’ words: love your neighbour as you love yourself) shows members of the congregation that they have a responsibility towards others, particularly towards the sick, the old, the needy, those threatened by danger and the troubled. A ‘visiting ministry’ within the congregation can serve to strengthen and encourage members to undertake this important task.

⁸ According to Luther’s explanation of the third article of the Creed in his Small Catechism.

⁹ “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms.” (1 Peter 4:10).

10.5 Evangelism and Missionary Engagement

The Great Commission to make disciples of all people calls the Church to lead all people to Christ through word and deed. This Commission applies to the entire church, to every local congregation, to every Christian. This ministry takes place through the missionary endeavours of the local congregation, through the actual sending out of missionaries and through collections and donations that are directed towards missionary ends. In cooperation with other congregations and churches this missionary service can reach specific target groups.

10.6 Christ and Congregation in the Public Sphere

Christians should show their faith in the public sphere. This applies to individuals as well as churches. The Christian acts in accordance with their conscience, which is bound to the Word of God. They engage so that all people may experience justice, with particular attention given to the disadvantaged and weaker members of society. They testify to the will of God, even when this is not popular and they know it to be to their own detriment. The Christian makes themselves available for cultural, social and political tasks. Here the intention is: God's will should be visible to people in every life situation. In word and deed, church and congregation stand shoulder to shoulder with all who hold public responsibility in business, administration, politics, law, education and other areas and entrust them to God's guidance in prayer. The church enacts her prophetic duty by preaching justice to the consciences of Christians and non-Christians alike.

10.7 Caring for God's creation

In keeping with the early Christian creeds, we acknowledge that all creation is the work of God, the creator of the universe. We recognise the necessity and urgency to care for this creation, in light of the environmental devastation witnessed across the world today. As a church, we commit ourselves to actively caring for the environment as an integral part of our Christian witness. We aim to do this through:

- a) Teaching and theological reflection on environmental matters.
- b) Ensuring that the activities of the church and congregation are done in an environmentally responsible way.
- c) Starting or supporting local environmental initiatives in our sphere of influence.
- d) Living out our prophetic witness on environmental issues in the same manner as we do on issues of social justice.

10.8 Unity of the Church

Jesus Christ is the unifying centre of the church and also her head. The unity of her members is a given as is made clear in the prayer of our Lord¹⁰. This is why Christians are not resigned to the divisions within the Body of Christ and are open to Ecumenism. Efforts to unify the Church are a constant task. The Holy Spirit, who through the Gospel calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies all Christianity on earth, urges us to esteem one another, to listen to each other, to speak to each other and to pass on to others the testimony of truth that has been given to us in love.

The congregations know themselves bound to all congregations and churches that subscribe to the Lutheran Confessional Writings. They are in fellowship of altar and pulpit with the fellow member churches of the Lutheran World Federation.

11. The Evangelical Lutheran Church and other Churches

11.1 The Gospel as Focal Point

The focal point of the testimony of our church is the Gospel of the grace of God, the joyful, liberating message of Jesus Christ. The love of God, and not our doing or striving, saves us.

¹⁰ "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth...I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me" (John 17: 17+20-21).

Christians respond to God's actions by trusting in Him, by daily turning to him (repentance) and through love towards their neighbour. In this way evangelical faith is expressed.

All Christian churches base themselves on Holy Scripture. What is definitive for the manner of faith in question is how they understand the Bible. We in the NELCSA understand Scripture from its central point, namely the Good News that Jesus Christ died on the Cross, was buried and rose again from the dead on the third day¹¹. He is the living Word of God incarnate. That which promotes Christ is key to understanding the Word of God in the Old and the New Testament.

The Word of God always meets the individual in a twofold manner: as Law and as Gospel, as challenge or demand and as assurance. The Law serves to protect and it exposes sin and judges the person who has sinned. The Gospel accepts the sinner, lays the guilt on Jesus Christ and pardons the sinner as Christ dies on the Cross in the sinner's place. In this world, the Christian remains both sinner and justified („simul iustus et peccator“ – Luther).

11.2 The Working of the Holy Spirit

God grants the gift of the Holy Spirit through the Means of Grace: Word and Sacrament. The Holy Spirit creates faith in those who hear the Gospel where and when He chooses. The Holy Spirit gathers believers together as the Christian Church. He is never subject to us, rather we are at all times subject to Him.

11.3 The Visibility of the One Christian Church

The church is present where people gather around Word and Sacrament. The Lutheran Church emphasises the visibility of the church: the fellowship of the baptised is the Body of Christ. This is expressed in the Worship Service and in groups. At the same time our church is aware that the Body of Christ may take on many forms and welcomes this. Our Lutheran Church is not the 'one true church.' She is however part thereof, a member of the Body of Christ.

We further recognise that the visible church – our own church as well as all others – is a *corpus permixtum*, a mixed church in which we always find both the true and false church at the same time. In effect that means that none of our churches are perfect¹².

11.4 The Church Year and Church Symbols

The Lutheran Church holds to the division of the Church Year and the specific readings prescribed for each Sunday. This is understood as sound order and not as law. Christian symbols in the church and in the cemetery remind us of the grace of God.

¹¹ “For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15: 3-4).

¹² The concept of the *ecclesia permixta* – the mixed church – understands that the visible church that we see and experience in the world is one in which both the true and false church invisibly and inseparably coexist. Just as we as individuals are both sinners and justified or made righteous at the same time, so the visible church on earth, which is made up of such individuals, contains both sin and righteousness. In us as individuals and in our churches, we therefore find belief and unbelief, good and bad, right and wrong. The story in Mark 9:17-25 of a father's shout, “I believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” before Jesus heals his son, speaks to this paradox. In the parable of the wheat and the weeds in Matthew 13:24-30, Jesus also talks about this reality – wheat and weeds grow together. While the church has a responsibility to correct wrongs and address sin where these are recognised, this parable also cautions us to take care as we are not always able to distinguish what is truly wheat and what are weeds, what is true church and what is false church. The ultimate judgement lies with God.

The NELCSA, as Lutheran Church, confesses that the Church of Christ is bigger than any single denomination. Therefore, we gladly join all Christians in proclaiming that Jesus Christ is Lord

