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## “Forgive us our sins” (Matthew 6:12)

### EKD Statement on the Genocide in former German South West Africa

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From 1884 to 1915, the present-day Namibia was a German colony. The African population, especially the OvaHerero and the Nama, rose up in defence against the increasing disenfranchisement, dispossession and violence they were exposed to by the settlers. The African resistance was brutally crushed by the German "protection force" (Schutztruppe) in what most historians refer to as the first genocide of the 20th century. The two annihilation orders issued by Lieutenant General von Trotha against the OvaHerero on October 2, 1904 and against the Nama on April 22, 1905 were clearly genocidal. After the battle of Waterberg, much of the OvaHerero population fled the encirclement by the German forces into the Omaheke desert, where most of them died of thirst. More than half of the African population in today's central and southern Namibia, especially members of the peoples of the Ovaherero, Nama, Damara and San/Khoisan, fell victim to the German colonial crimes. The genocide survivors were dispossessed, forcibly relocated and obliged to do forced labour in concentration camps.

The position of the Rhenish Mission during the genocide was ambivalent. While some missionaries showed great loyalty to the imperial powers, others acted to defend the rightful demands of the OvaHerero and Nama.

By contrast, the pastors sent out by the Prussian Evangelical Supreme Church Council to provide pastoral services for the Protestant settlers and colonial forces generally did not

oppose the atrocities against the OvaHerero, Nama, Damara and San/Khoisan. Instead, they interpreted the annexation of communities in the colonial territories in the same way as the German regional churches that had sent them: as the national project of the "greater German Reich" advocated by Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1896 to secure and consolidate the imperial power of Germany in the world. By way of theological justification of the imperial claim to power and colonial rule they helped to prepare the ground for the deaths of many thousands of Namibians from different ethnic groups who were killed both in acts of war and in the concentration camps of the German "protection force". Although (as far as can be seen from the sources) the German Protestant pastors in the former South West African colony did not directly call for the mass killings, many of their words and actions were poisoned by a deep-seated racism, stemming from a sense of cultural superiority and the fear that their identity might be at risk.

This is a great sin and not to be justified at all. As the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) and successor organization of the former Prussian Evangelical High Church Council (*Oberkirchenrat*), which at the time acted on behalf of all German Evangelical regional churches, we expressly confess our guilt today towards the entire Namibian people and before God. From the depths of our hearts, we ask the descendants of the victims, and all those whose ancestors suffered from the exercise of German colonial rule, for

forgiveness for the wrong done them and the pain they suffered as a consequence.

As the Evangelical Church in Germany, we are deeply aware that any acts of atonement cannot undo the injustice committed. Yet this confession of guilt is an expression of our permanent historical and ethical obligation to join the descendants of the victims in keeping the memory of this genocide alive, to work for its public recognition as genocide and to overcome the injustice caused and perpetuated by the German colonial rule in Namibia.

In doing so, we recall the process of reconciliation that was started between Christians in Germany and Namibia almost 50 years ago. In 1971 employees of the United Evangelical Mission (UEM) in Namibia confessed that "we have often succumbed to the temptation to cooperate with the secular rulers at the expense of our indigenous brothers and sisters." Representatives of the UEM mission board reiterated this confession of guilt in 1978 and 1990. The church leadership of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia (ELCRN) accepted these confessions and pronounced their forgiveness. Together Christians in Namibia and Germany then started initiatives to restructure mission work as brothers and sisters. In 2004, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia (ELCRN) and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia [ELCIN (GELC)] under the direction of Bishops Zephania Kameeta and Reinhard Keding set up the "Bishops Committee" so that all social groups in Namibia could commemorate the battle of Waterberg and its terrible consequences on August 12. The reconciliation initiatives that arose during this process have continued to shape the political debate on dealing with the colonial past.

For this reason, the Evangelical Church in Germany supported the activities carried out in two study processes (2007-2015) for critical appraisal of the role of the churches and mission agencies in Germany and in Southern Africa during colonial rule and the apartheid era. All participants shared the strong desire that dealing with the colonial past would help all those involved, as churches confessing the one Lord Jesus Christ, not only to better understand the past, but also to heal its wounds. That liberates us all, as Christians in our churches, to tackle the challenges of the present from a new perspective.

As the Evangelical Church in Germany, we recognize with gratitude all the steps already undertaken by the United Church Council - Namibian Evangelical Lutheran Churches (UCC-NELC) on the path of reconciliation between the different Lutheran churches in Namibia. We will continue to do our utmost to support and accompany these processes on the path toward unity.

We acknowledge that descendants of both victims and victimizers carry burdens of the past. With them, we want to walk the difficult path to address, heal and thus overcome the trauma and the guilt, so that future generations can live a healed and reconciled life in Namibia and Germany.

"We have to remember the time of colonialism, but in doing so we will need the spirit of reconciliation. The liberation of our countries can only succeed if people come together from all sections of the population, listen to the pain and the worries of the others and join hands to finally overcome the effects of the colonial past that still define our lives" (Bishop Zephania Kameeta, from the preface to the documentation of the first study process: "The German Protestant Church in

Colonial Southern Africa", Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden, 2012).

In the light of the above statement, and after intense consultation with German and Namibian partner churches and mission agencies, the Evangelical Church in Germany offers its cooperation in accompanying the process of healing memories in Namibia and Germany. This can happen in different ways, for example by:

- participating in a public act of recognition of the genocide in Namibia and Germany,
- supporting efforts for the identification and design of memorials to the genocide in Namibia and Germany,
- cooperating in the transfer and reception of the mortal remains of genocide victims that are still in Germany, in a dignified and fitting manner,
- supporting the resumption and advancement of the project to found a Namibian-German Institute for Reconciliation and Development, as suggested by the Namibian churches in 2004,
- supporting a remodelling of the commemoration wall and utilization concept of Christ Church, Windhoek,
- cooperating in the continuing inclusion of past events in educational curricula and in theological reflection for coming generations of Namibians and Germans, and
- supporting visible signs of reconciliation towards the groups directly affected by the genocide.

In addition, existing partnership relations between the churches will need to be revisited and realigned. The current partnership

relations - with the structural distinction between links based on mission contacts and those based on the international partnership activity of German churches - still reflect and follow from the colonial roots of these relationships. The current systems of partnership, financial support and personnel exchange should therefore be reviewed and revised in such a way as to overcome the divisions of the past. Those involved in the planning and implementing of partnership programmes must carefully increase awareness of the real situation in which the respective partners live.