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## Statement by the chairs of the German Bishops' Conference and the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany on Germany's Council presidency (July-December 2020)

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### “Europe is the future”

*On 1 July 2020 Germany will take over the presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU). To mark this event, Bishop Dr Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, chair of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) and Bishop Dr Georg Bätzing, chair of the German Bishops' Conference, make the following statement:*

As Christian churches we trust in God, who promises us salvation and well-being in his Son Jesus Christ. God keeps God's promises to us human beings. And God gives us the strength to contribute our part to a successful outcome. Besides the calling to give comfort and offer orientation in the present crisis, we in the churches continue to see ourselves as a public voice, speaking up so that we stand by one another with solidarity in Europe and do not lose sight of the most vulnerable in society or of stewardship of creation.

Speaking as chairs of the German Bishops' Conference and the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), we are convinced that the future of all of us lies not with the nation states but in Europe. We therefore call on German politics, in the context of Germany's Council presidency in 2020 and beyond, to shape the future of our common European home with responsibility for European cohesion.

Now of all times it is important to walk a common path into the future, in the spirit of the presidency's motto “Together. Making Europe strong again”. After all, only a united Europe can overcome the societal, economic and social consequences of the coronavirus pandemic. No one is gaining from national attempts to go it alone, egotism and reciprocal blame games; instead, the concern must be to tackle the great challenges in a spirit of European solidarity. As the largest and economically strongest EU Member State, Germany has an opportunity through the Council presidency to play a leading role in the spirit of *primus inter pares*.

The main focus of the presidency will be on combating the economic crisis in Europe. Rapid agreement on the 2021–2027 Multiannual Financial Framework is needed for the necessary economic reconstruction in the EU. In this context we should resolutely pursue the course already embarked upon towards a climate-neutral society, preserve biodiversity and protect the environment. Here we welcome the announcement by Federal Chancellor Dr. Angela Merkel that strengthening social cohesion and the European Green Deal for a sustainable, climate-neutral EU by 2050 are supposed to be central issues as well.

There is much to indicate that the coronavirus pandemic is impacting most on structurally disadvantaged countries and mainly poorer population groups. Consequently, the Council presidency should be used as an opportunity to support the countries hardest hit, also outside the EU. A clear expression of European responsibility for the global common good would be e.g. an initiative for the social and ecological set up of supply and value chains in line with human rights.

As churches we continue to regard the following topics, too, as particularly important for the German Council presidency. In all the efforts to cope with the consequences of the pandemic they should not be overlooked:

- The coronavirus crisis has accelerated digitalisation even more. In an increasingly digitalised world, it is imperative to use the advantages of digitalisation, to avoid or reduce risks and to even out the resultant imbalances in the interest of participation and social justice.
- We must open up prospects for the Europeans, particularly the younger generation, and enable them to hope for a better future. Besides appreciated initiatives to offer them good training or social protection, what is needed, above all, is job creation and security of work.
- The EU needs a humane, just and solidarity-based asylum policy, which enables refugees to have a safe access to protection, guarantees high standards of reception and procedure, and is equally accepted and

implemented by all Member States. In the context of a comprehensive European migration policy, there is also a need for legal, fair and transparent opportunities to enter the EU for vocational and university training and to take up work.

- The EU is founded on the understanding that it is a community of law, guaranteeing democratic participation and the principles of the rule of law in a pluralist society. These principles must not be suspended on the pretext of containing the coronavirus.
- Even though the United Kingdom officially left the EU at the beginning of this year, the two sides should strive for a close partnership, as well as stable and fair economic relations based on high environmental and social standards, in order to preserve our common heritage.

During its Council presidency, Germany can take forward-looking initiatives to shape European responses to the current European and global challenges. In these difficult times, European integration urgently needs new momentum. It should therefore be the ambition of the Council presidency not just to react to external constraints but to be proactive. We regard the proposed Conference on the Future of Europe as an important instrument, and would like to contribute as churches into making it a success. We wish the Federal Government God's blessing and all the very best for the upcoming steps and decisions!

Bonn and Hanover, 17 June 2020

*Bishop Dr Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, chair of the  
Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany*

*Bishop Dr Georg Bätzing, chair of the German  
Bishops' Conference*