

## **Report by the Secretary**

### **General Assembly of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe**

### **Budapest 12-18 September 2006**

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

This is my last report to a General Assembly after nineteen years as Secretary of the CPCE. I therefore hope that you will allow me not only to report on the work of the Secretariat in Berlin between Belfast and Budapest but also to go further and give a kind of personal summing-up by the Secretary. The Presidium of the Executive Committee has given me permission to do this and the Secretariat has to act on their directive. However, I promise that I will be duly brief. It is almost 'siesta time' and I cannot rule out the possibility that some people will be sighing, secretly or openly, 'Not another speech, and in the early afternoon too!'

My summing up is in three parts: 1. My joy. 2. My sadness. 3. My hope.

#### **1. My joy**

I would like to begin by looking at the Leuenberg Agreement itself. It is now available in 14 languages; since 2001 new translations have been added into Romanian, Hungarian and Czech. Alongside the directives of the Executive Committee the Agreement is the real instruction for the Secretary of the CPCE, although he does not appear at all in it. But we also look in vain for you, dear sisters and brothers, for the General Assembly, the Executive Committee and much else.

The decisive sentence in the Agreement about the place of the realization of church fellowship simply runs: 'It is in the life of the churches and congregations that church fellowship becomes a reality' (LA 35). Specifically, according to Article 29 that means fellowship in worship, preaching and the eucharist, and as much common effort as possible towards justice and peace in the world.

Unless all the signs are deceptive, here the authors of the Agreement were looking at the individual Reformed and Lutheran churches in the different countries of Europe. In 1973, at a time when Europe was still divided, they had the whole of Europe at best in view within the scope of co-ordination in continuing theological conversation (LA 37-41). In the 33 years with the Agreement more has grown out of that. And this more is our fellowship at the General Assembly, in the Executive Committee, in the regional groups and consultations. A fragile more! But church fellowship is like a tree which needs a long time to grow. I love the rowan tree, and ten years ago planted six of them on a piece of land near Hitzacker in North Germany. It took a long time for the first red berries to appear. I have tried to do all I can to make our tree of Protestant church fellowship in Europe grow like the tree in Psalm 1, so that it cannot be felled, although, or precisely because, I have seen an axe or two.

In Article 35, which I have already quoted, the Agreement speaks of 'believing in the unifying power of the Holy Spirit'. I too believe in this power. The Agreement itself was its instrument. The Agreement did not fall from heaven; it was the result of the most intensive theological reflection and work on the basis of the Reformation confessions. The prime instrument of the Holy Spirit is a Protestant theology which is in accord with the Bible and with the times. Without it there would have been no Reformation. Each of the Christian confessions has its backbone. In Orthodoxy it is the liturgy, some say that it is monasticism; for the Roman Catholic Church it is the papacy with the Curia; for Anglicans it is the episcopate. The backbone of the Protestant church and Protestant church fellowship is

Protestant theology. In it the church does not flee from reason but seeks it, in order to be capable of speaking and arguing and not least of self-criticism.

Campegio Vitringa, a seventeenth-century Dutch Reformed theologian, gave a fine definition: a 'theologian' is 'someone who speaks of God for the glory of God in accordance with the truth'. The primal datum of such theology is the public clash in Antioch in which the apostle Paul, on the basis of the 'truth of the gospel', spoke out against the hypocritical and fearful behaviour of Peter, the prince of the apostles, in the question of church fellowship between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians (Gal.2.14). All the forward-looking doctrinal documents of the CPCE, for example 'The Church of Jesus Christ' (1994), 'Church and Israel' (2001) or 'Church-People-State-Nation' (2001), or the result of the conversation with the Baptists, 'The Beginning of the Christian Life and the Nature of the Church' (2004), have been about fellowship in the gospel to the glory of God, which as we all know corresponds to peace on earth (Luke 2:14).

The Secretariat has produced the following books or pamphlets between 2001 and 2006:

1. Reconciled Diversity - The Task of the Protestant Churches in Europe. Texts from the 5<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the CPCE in Belfast, 2001
2. In the bilingual (German/English) series 'Leuenberg Texts':
  - Leuenberg Texts 6: 'Church and Israel', 2001
  - Leuenberg Texts 7: 'Church-People-State-Nation', 2002
  - Leuenberg Texts 8: 'Consultation between the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and the Leuenberg Church Fellowship (LCF) on Ecclesiology', 2004
  - Leuenberg Texts 9: 'Dialogue between the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) and the European Baptist Federation (EBF) on the Doctrine and Practice of Baptism', 2005
3. 'Being Protestant in Europe. 30 Years of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship' – trilingual (German, English, French)
4. 'We celebrate the diversity of Churches' (a collection of liturgical material), 2003 – trilingual (German, English, French)
5. 'Theology for Europe – Perspectives of Protestant Churches', 2006
6. Finally you have before you a foretaste of the Protestant hymnbook for Europe, Colours of Grace.
7. I should also mention the CPCE circular letters, CPCE Europa-Info and CPCE Internet News Letter, all in German, English and French.

Of course I know that Protestant theology isn't everything in the church. Theologians can differ and separate into camps and tendencies. Theology is not identical with the leadership of a church or a church fellowship. It needs to be accepted by the church and in the church, the fellowship of believers. The reception of the Leuenberg Agreement, which is still going on, is the best indication of that.

Between 1986 and 2006 it has been signed by 18 further churches, 25 if we include the Methodist Churches with their special 'Joint Declaration on Church Fellowship' (1994/97). The most recent signatories have been the Reformed Church in Transcarpathia and the Protestant Church in the Principality of Liechtenstein.

It was my joy and passion as Secretary of the CPCE to have been involved with and to have helped with this. That joy and passion were always strengthened and increased where I saw that our theological work helped to give a profile and depth to church life and the inner-

Protestant ecumene in the signatory churches, whether in Denmark or Norway, Switzerland or Italy, the Netherlands or Romania, Germany or the Czech Republic.

The great German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher once wrote: ‘Christian theology is... the embodiment of those scientific insights and rules without the possession and use of which it is impossible to lead the church... in a harmonious way.’ Such theological leadership of the CPCE has been characteristic of the three Executive Committees during my time in office, the Presidia and the Presidents, most recently Professor Elisabeth Parmentier. It has also been a joy to take part in them. At the same time, quite apart from the matter-of-factness and warmth of personal collaboration this has inspired the work of the Secretariat. Indeed it has been my joy to work with you, Frau Dr Müller, Professor Dr Friedrich, Dr Heidtmann, Herr Flügge and Frau Moon, the small staff in the secretariat, and at times with you, Herr Christoph and Herr Hahn, and your predecessors, like Herr Bürgel. In this grateful joy I include the Head Office of the ECU, now the UEK, for a long time my main place of work. Now for the second point.

## **2. My sadness**

Those who have reason and occasion for joy will also be sensitive to what causes sadness and sorrow. As we know, where there is joy, sadness also lurks. If Protestant theology is an instrument of the Holy Spirit, then it must also have specific consequences for the unity and union of the churches. Of course the Holy Spirit also has quite different means of unity at its disposal, like reason, time, the language of love, and suffering. At all events anyone who said ‘Yes to theological doctrinal conversations, but let everything else remain as it is’ would deeply misunderstand the task of Protestant theology. This is a suspicion of the Agreement which is time and again expressed by the Catholic side.

The Agreement itself has made it clear what beyond question must remain the same: the right understanding and proclamation of the gospel, the administration of the sacraments in accordance with the gospel, the Reformation confessions. But does that also apply to every historical shape of the church, to every confessional demarcation? Aren’t the Reformation churches destined for more unity? Or does there lie behind the confessional self-limitation of the shaping of the church that fear which a leading German theologian recently referred to as the greatest obstacle to ecumenism: fear of the consequences, of the actions of the Holy Spirit among the Christian churches which produce unity?

Time and again I have also noted such fear or, to put it another way, such a lack of courage, in my activity within the Protestant sphere. That is my sadness. For example, there is fear, as I heard it put in Reformed France, of too much consensus in the Leuenberg sphere, which could lead to the loss of one’s own confessional identity. Here the document ‘The Church of Jesus Christ’ in particular, confirming the Leuenberg Agreement, explains how the foundation of the church – the action of the triune God – gives space for freedom of faith or different shapings of the church, its order and its ministries. But it also gives space for more unity of those who are different.

As well as the anxiety about losing identities, in the Nordic Lutheran churches there is the fear that the CPCE could develop into a Protestant block in Europe. Here in all the years of collaboration with CEC we have sought, found and practised a division of work and an expansion. The guideline has been as much social and political witness as possible in common with other churches. The collaboration of the member of the CPCE Secretariat in the CEC Commission for Church and Society, Dr Heidtmann, has helped towards this. That should not mean putting our common Protestant identity under a bushel but making it also shine out in Brussels or Strasbourg. As far as ecumenism is concerned, my understanding of

the work of the CPCE is that it is a preunderstanding of what we as Reformation churches must contribute or say in the wider Christian ecumene.

Or I am pained by the fear of discussion of the ordination of women in Poland, Latvia or the Ukraine. We know that it has been rejected by the Lutheran Conference of Bishops there, the Lutheran Archbishop or the Synod, partly out of consideration of the Catholic context, partly with an appeal to a 'Slavonic understanding of women', partly with reference to biblical passages like 1 Cor.14:34, and partly for practical reasons. But a broad theological discussion in which not only the command for silence in 1 Cor.14:34 but also texts like 1 Cor.11:5 (women pray and preach in worship), Gal.3:28 and the Easter message to the women in all the Gospels plays a role, is not taking place. The ordination of women who then, in so far as they are called to it, could assume the office of bishop is an expression of specifically evangelical freedom grounded in the Bible.

Not least I am saddened by the fact that the Lutheran churches of Sweden and Finland are giving a wide birth to the Leuenberg Agreement. Particularly from Finland the Yes to the Leuenberg doctrinal conversations is bound up with a No to the Leuenberg Agreement and our form of church fellowship, with a clear preference for the Porvoo Church Fellowship. Mustn't this be interpreted as fear, when the request to talk theologically about the criticism of the Agreement remains unanswered? Finally, the Baltic churches, like the small Protestant churches in Spain and Portugal, though for different reasons, are holding back over the realization of church fellowship, though they have entered into this by signing the Agreement.

The Agreement says that 'it is in the life of the churches and congregations that church fellowship becomes a reality'. But what is the position in the individual countries in which there are Reformed and Lutheran churches? How are things there with the realization of fellowship in witness and service? Must there, for example, be separate Reformed and Lutheran Danube Conferences? Can't there be even greater collaboration in the sphere of education? Couldn't even theological institutes and seminaries be combined? Couldn't Lutheran and Reformed churches in Hungary sing from one and the same hymn book? What roles do ethnic and linguistic moulds play in the hindrance to more church fellowship in particular areas of Europe? I remember an encounter with Reformed pastors of Hungarian descent and Lutheran pastors of Slovakian descent in Vojvodina, where I was told that the formation of a shared church was possible theologically on the basis of the Agreement, but came to grief on the different ethnic and linguistic origins. But everywhere there have been and are also encouraging signs of a great hope. So now:

### **3. My hope**

Martin Luther remarked: 'When we are sorrowful, indeed when we are closest to despair, then hope shines out most brightly.' It looks for signs and is nourished by them. The Archbishop of Estonia, Jaan Kiivit, who died last year and who was involved in the Porvoo Church Fellowship and the Leuenberg Church Fellowship, was one such sign of hope. Together with him, two years ago we succeeded in motivating the Leading Bishop of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in the Republic of Poland, Janusz Jagucki, to sign a declaration on the ordination of women which stated 'that there are no obstacles to the participation of clergy – women and men – from the Protestant sister churches (of the CPCE) in the worship of the Evangelical Augsburg Church in Poland in accordance with the rights granted to them in ordination'.

At the same time the signing of the Leuenberg Agreement by the Lutheran Church in Norway has shown that a Lutheran church can affirm and practise both models of church fellowship, the Episcopal Anglican model of the Porvoo Statement and the Lutheran-Reformed-Methodist model of the Leuenberg Agreement orientated on a consensus in the understanding of the

gospel and the sacraments. From this sign we have attempted to derive theological stimuli which can also consolidate and deepen the tie with the Anglican churches in Europe. Why shouldn't it be possible to work out together a declaration of the type of the Joint Meissen Statement or the Joint Statement of Reuilly for the relationship between the Reformed and Lutheran and the Anglican churches in Europe generally?

Other signs of hope come from the Netherlands, from France and from Czechia. After a process lasting decades, in the Netherlands a United Protestant Church has emerged from the large Reformed and small Lutheran church which explicitly preserves the different confessional identities. In France the large Lutheran and small Reformed church in Alsace-Lorraine form an administrative union. These are also forms of church fellowship. In the Czech Republic the various signatories to the Leuenberg Agreement have come together in a Leuenberg synod. They show that the word 'synod' can be understood in a relaxed way as a coming together which does not put in question the autonomy of the churches involved and can thus do a very great deal towards creating more fellowship between the small Protestant churches in secularized Czechia. The Melanchthon Centre in Rome, in which the Waldensians and the Lutherans have worked together with the Evangelical Church in Germany to make it possible for students to study theology as it were right in front of the gates of the Vatican, also serves as a sign.

I also see signs of hope in the wider ecumenical world. Dialogue with Orthodoxy in Europe has settled down and at the same time has become more concentrated. The consultation at the seat of the Patriarch of Constantinople has aimed at a breakthrough here. The question of reciprocal baptism will be a first test here. We had two dialogues with the European Baptists on the understanding of the church and baptism which sounded confident. I eagerly await the effects that they may have and here too am ready for that patience which, as Eberhard Jüngel says, is the staying power of passion.

Differing signs are coming from Rome, which give hope and take it away at the same time. In connection with the Protestant churches Cardinal Kasper speaks of a different type of church from the Roman Catholic Church, whereas Pope Benedict XVI partly maintains the discriminating talk of church fellowships and partly, in a recent interview about Germany, spoke openly of Protestant churches and in so doing formulated perspectives for gaining an 'inner unity' which we can warmly welcome: fellowship in ethical witness and in concern for the portrayal of God, whose face is shown in Jesus Christ. The CEC with its contacts with the Council of European Bishops' Conferences and the European Ecumenical Assemblies which both support is acting as an important intermediary, particularly for a shared witness on ethical questions.

What the Joint Declaration on Justification has in the end produced is still an open question. The criticism of the Declaration which recalls that from the perspective of the New Testament the doctrine of justification actually forms the foundation of church fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians is right. That means that where one side refuses such church fellowship, at any rate the New Testament function of the doctrine of justification is lacking. Therefore in my view much is to be gained from the key words of an 'ecumene of profiles' or 'of mutual respect'. And it is here that my hope for the wider ecumene lies.

The Roman Catholic Church has undergone tremendous developments in its long history. These also time and again include new farewells to error. I recall only the claim of the papacy to political supremacy, the anti-Modernist oath or the condemnation of Galileo. The last ecumenical step will be a farewell to an understanding of the church according to which the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church is perfectly realized only in the Roman Catholic Church. Then the time for church fellowship also with the churches of the Reformation will have come. We must wait patiently for this development. We ourselves are furthering it as

best we can, by resolutely being a Protestant church and church fellowship. If the Catholic Church gets that far, the question will arise of a church fellowship with the Pope, but in no way under him. The origin of Christianity from the diversity of communities and types of church united by Christ through the Holy Spirit without the office of Pope for everyone is also the future of the church.

I want to end with a reference to an encouraging sign of quite a different kind, which nurtures my hope for the further growth of the CPCE. That the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession and the Helvetic Confession in Austria has declared itself ready to house the CPCE Secretariat in Vienna from 2007 is for me both hope and healing. My church, the Church of the Prussian Union and its successor, have substantially furthered and supported the CPCE Secretariat for 19 years. In the course of the structural reform in the EKD its Head Office in Berlin will be disbanded. This helpful structure will disappear. That in this situation the Austrians have said that they will carry on is liberating, edifying and cheering. I am delighted that Oberkirchenrat Professor Bünker has declared himself ready to succeed me as Secretary if the new Executive Committee chooses him. My sympathy goes out to him, not least because he too will have to bear the burden and the pleasure of two offices. But the Evangelical Church in Austria is a diaspora church. It can shoulder the new dignity and burden only if at the same time there is a new financial and structural solidarity and commitment from the churches in the CPCE.

We should show the Reformation churches and the other Christian confessions in Europe that we are in a position to do this and how we shall do it. That is my hope. First of all the General Assembly must grasp this hope. They can also bring this joy to the Secretary who is leaving. For what happens when we rejoice?

Dear brothers and sisters, when we rejoice we accord with God himself, of whom Calvin made the very fine statement that the createdness of the world is grounded in his joy. God does not abandon the work of his hands. The tree of our fellowship is such a work. It must continue to grow, and if that is to happen it must be constantly watered. A joint hymnbook also offers fruitful service here. But in addition there is a need for the committed care of a stable Secretariat. Thank you.