



The Leuenberg Agreement and Movement¹: one important step forward towards the unity of protestant² churches

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Abstract

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The article deals with the Leuenberg Agreement of 1973 and the ecumenical development among its signatory churches during the following decades. After some historical and statistical remarks regarding the origin, growth, and further development of the Leuenberg Movement/Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE), the theological method and work of the Movement (CPCE) is presented through a few examples from the so-called Leuenberg documents.

Specific attention is given to the theological reasoning through which achievement of full fellowship of pulpit and altar between most of the protestant churches in Europe was achieved over the years. From a personal (and European) point of view, some of the major achievements and benefits of "Leuenberg" are highlighted, as are several drawbacks, shortcomings and challenges over the last 35 years and through to the present times.

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2 *Protestant*, in the European context, normally refers to reformed *and* Lutheran churches, thus I am using it throughout this article when referring to the churches that are rooted in one of the strands of the European Reformation in the sixteenth century.

Opsomming

Die Leuenberg Ooreenkoms en -Beweging: 'n belangrike stap vorentoe ten opsigte van eenheid van protestantse kerke

Die artikel handel oor die Leuenbergse Ooreenkoms van 1973, asook die ekumeniese ontwikkelings sedertdien in die kerke wat dit onderteken het. Eerstens word historiese en statistiese opmerkings oor die oorsprong, groei en verdere ontwikkeling van die Leuenberg-Beweging/Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) gegee. Die teologiese metodiek en werksaamhede van die beweging word daargestel aan die hand van enkele voorbeelde uit die Leuenberg-dokumente.

Aandag word ook spesifiek gegee aan die teologiese argumentasie wat daartoe gelei het dat die meeste protestantse kerke in Europa vandag gemeenskap van kansel en nagmaal het. Die outeur bespreek op grond van sy Europese agtergrond sommige van die belangrike positiewe mylpale wat deur die Beweging bereik is, sowel as tekortkomings en uitdagings vir vandag, 35 jaar later.

1. Introduction

When, in 1552, Archbishop Cranmer of England invited Calvin, Melancthon, Bullinger, and others to draw up a consensus creed for the reformed churches, Calvin famously replied that he would eagerly “cross ten seas” for the sake of the unity of the church (Schaff, 1997:§ 159). However, looking at today’s Christianity with its dozens of major denominations and hundreds of subdenominations, splinter groups, and divisions, the challenge in Calvin’s time might, in hindsight, appear comparatively easy. However, despite the fact that the twentieth century had its fair share of further denominational separations, it also saw some important progress regarding church unity, at least among protestant churches which are rooted in the sixteenth-century European Reformation. One of the most important and far-reaching developments in Europe was the inner-protestant movement that led to the Leuenberg Agreement (LA) of 1973 and brought with it, first, the Leuenberg Movement, and then in 2003, the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE). Being a German theologian with European roots myself, I would like to highlight a few of the effects and reverberations Leuenberg, and the fellowship that grew out of it, had on my perception of church and church unity.

To start with a startling observation: Although the LA arguably is one of the most important ecumenical documents of the twentieth cen-

tury, it is probably one of the least celebrated and recognised statements. Compared with, e.g. the Barmen Theological Declaration from 1934 or the Joint Declaration on Justification between the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church from the late nineties, it has never aroused much public notice or interest. Members of our protestant churches in Germany and even students of theology are generally pretty much surprised to find LA printed in our German hymnbooks at all, right beside the famous confessions from the early church, from the sixteenth century and the Barmen Theological Declaration.

And yet, LA has accomplished something that, only a few decades earlier, very few would have thought possible. It has brought together protestant churches from all over Europe and from almost every corner of protestant tradition. Today, 35 years after the original signing of LA, the protestant churches in Europe have found a common ground and are on their way towards a common goal.

2. LA and CPCE: history and development

When LA was ratified in 1973, it was signed by 50 churches. Simultaneously, the mandatory churches formed the Leuenberg Church Fellowship (LCF), a fellowship of churches with roots in the Reformation or even deeper than that. Among the first mandatory churches were not only Lutheran, reformed and united churches from several European countries, but also some of the so-called pre-Reformation churches such as the Waldensian Church or the Czech Brethren. Over the years, the number of mandatory churches has roughly doubled.

In 1990, LA had been signed by 81 churches (which included many churches from Eastern Europe who could only join the Fellowship fully after the fall of the “iron curtain”). In 1996, a further important step took place, when the seven methodist churches in Europe signed the Agreement and thus became part of the Fellowship. Since some of the mandatory churches have merged over the last decades, while others have been disbanded, the actual number of member churches differs slightly according to various sources, but is usually given as 103 as of 2008/2009 (CPCE, 2003).

But those are only statistics. They just go to show the enormous support, LA and LCF have received, and also to a certain extent the eagerness with which European churches were determined to overcome traditional boundaries, separations and frictions. To take my home country as an example: In 1983, the EKD (Evangelical Church

in Germany) incorporated LA into its constitution – and it was only then that fellowship of table and pulpit between the Lutheran, reformed and united member churches of EKD was fully and finally achieved, after 450 years of division and mutual exclusion.

In 2003, with the 30th anniversary of LA, the LCF changed its name to Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) to reflect the true nature of the achieved unity. The choice of name was wise. *Community* stands right between fellowship and union. It is more and stronger than just a loose working agreement, but it does not touch or jeopardise the specific traditions and confessions of its member churches. It expresses the aim for unity, not an urge for uniformity. Diversity is seen as enriching and is thus encouraged, not subdued. And yet, CPCE sees itself as a community of faith on the basis of a common understanding of the gospel and the task and challenge of a common witness and service in the world.

However, two exceptions have to be mentioned. Out of the five Scandinavian Lutheran churches, which were affiliated to the Leuenberg Church Fellowship since 1973 as so-called participating churches, only two churches (Denmark and Norway) have lately signed the Leuenberg Agreement. The large Lutheran churches of Finland and Sweden and the slightly less large Lutheran Church of Iceland are only participating churches and have not yet joined the Fellowship/CPCE fully. The same is true for the Anglican Church. The most obvious impediment seems to be a different notion of ordination, ministry, and episcopate – and, closely linked to those differences, the understanding of unity – that keeps these episcopal churches from joining the Community fully. There are ongoing talks between CPCE and the Anglican Church, but it seems that full fellowship will still take some time.

And yet another church has to be mentioned, which is not (yet) a member of CPCE, also for obvious reasons: the baptist churches, which would not subscribe to the traditional theology of baptism expressed in LA, have also not yet entered into the CPCE. These open questions might, however, be solved in due time.

What is more important and worth a moment's consideration is that most of the member churches of CPCE are minority churches in their countries. In Italy and France and many other countries of Southern Europe, protestant churches always had a very difficult stance against the overwhelming presence and influence of the Roman Catholic Church. It is no coincidence that these churches have brought with them a very distinct awareness of discrimination

and suppression into CPCE. The same is true for the pre-Reformation churches, I have mentioned (the Waldensian Church, the Czech Brethren, and others). That they also have gained full recognition among the more powerful protestant churches that surround them, is, in my opinion, even more important after many centuries of suppression and discrimination even at the hands of their fellow-protestants.

Viewed against this background, it is hardly surprising that LA (1973: § 1, 5) frequently mentions the suffering and hardships of many of its member churches:

Thankful that they have been led closer together, they [the churches] confess at the same time that guilt and suffering have also accompanied and still accompany the struggle for truth and unity in the church;

and:

But, time and again, there has also been an experience of brotherly fellowship, particularly in times of common suffering.

CPCE has been eager to live up to this legacy and responsibility over the last 35 years and has, again and again, expressed its “awareness for the voices of minorities”:

The majority of the Churches participating in the CPCE are minority Churches which carry out their mission under difficult conditions. In a Europe of political transformation, the CPCE calls for active solidarity and strives to create awareness for the voices of minorities. (CPCE, 2003.)

What else is special about LA and CPCE?

Firstly and from a historic point of view, one has to admit that LA and CPCE were something entirely new and special. Up until then, all unions and mergers between churches in Europe were mainly based on (church-)political decisions and, as such, found only half-hearted support or even met resistance. Some of these “forced” unions (especially in Germany) had the painful and traumatic result of factions or whole churches breaking away from the mainline protestant churches, since their more robust dogmatic constitutions would never allow them to set aside theological differences for the sake of political unions.

Secondly, LA avoided the trap so common in many theological statements, i.e. to try to reach full doctrinal consensus as a pre-

requisite for unity. All we need, LA states, is a solid foundation, a common understanding of the core principle(s), and the will and dedication to move onward: in service and worship, in common witness and theological reflection and clarification. So, instead of trying to sort out all theological differences at once and in general, LA focuses on the most important principle. What is it, that we as church have to proclaim and protect? With reference to CA 7 and the respective reformed traditions (cf. Rohls, 1987:207-210; LA, 1973:§ 2; 1) could formulate briefly and precisely:

In the view of the Reformation it follows that agreement in the right teaching of the Gospel and in the right administration of the sacraments is the necessary and sufficient prerequisite for the true unity of the Church. It is from these Reformation criteria that the participating churches derive their view of church fellowship as set out below.

And:

This common understanding of the Gospel enables them to declare and to realize church fellowship.

What to some might appear as a “weak” ecclesiology proved to be the strength of LA and its strongest point of departure. The process that led to LA and beyond is all about fellowship, mutual support and a joint theological journey without neglecting the tradition of diversity of its member churches. The ecumenical paradigm of *reconciled diversity* springs to mind and is indeed taken up by LA and CPCE (2003):

Well aware of its limits, the CPCE has the whole ecumenical scene in view and considers itself as a step on the way towards the unity of the universal Church of Jesus Christ *in a reconciled diversity*. For this reason it maintains working relations with the World Council of Churches, the Conference of European Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches as well as with the Anglican churches and European Baptist Federation.

The viewpoint of CPCE could be summarised as follows: We do not have to suppress our differences, but what keeps us apart is much less grave and important than what brings us together and holds us together: Jesus Christ and the common understanding of his gospel, as it is expressed in LA. From there we can carry on together. And carry on, the member churches did.

3. Work and theology of CPCE

LA (1973:§ 29) set itself the task to promote “co-operation in witness and service” among the member churches, without jeopardising their confessional status:

In the sense intended in this Agreement, church fellowship means that, on the basis of the consensus they have reached in their understanding of the Gospel, churches with different confessional positions accord each other fellowship in word and sacrament *and strive for the fullest possible co-operation in witness and service to the world.*

But which basic structures and organisational arrangements would best suit the mentioned task to “strive for the fullest possible co-operation”? LA had explicitly stated that no legal provision was included or anticipated regarding the further establishment and arrangements between the mandatory churches.

Organisational consequences: This declaration of church fellowship does not anticipate provisions of church law on particular matters of inter-church relations or within the churches. The churches will, however, take the Agreement into account in considering such provisions. (LA, 1973:§ 42.)

Any union detrimental to the lively plurality in styles of preaching, ways of worship, church order, and in diaconal and social action, would contradict the very nature of the church fellowship inaugurated by this declaration. On the other hand, in certain situations, because of the intimate connection between witness and order, the Church’s service may call for formal legal unification. Where organisational consequences are drawn from this declaration, it should not be at the expense of freedom of decision in minority churches. (LA, 1973:§ 45.)

At this point, the seemingly “weak” ecclesiology of LA had, in fact, a liberating effect. The deliberate abstention from prescriptions in questions of structure gave the member churches a considerable freedom as to how they would structure and stabilise their relationship. They opted for a model of close co-operation and yet enough liberty, since no church was to feel urged to abandon its confessional position or traditional structure.

The Community of Protestant Churches in Europe has an intentionally loose organisational structure for the sake of flexibility. *General Assemblies* take place about every six years, in which basic outlines of future work, new subjects for theological conversations are determined and the new Executive Committee

elected. The *Executive Committee*, led by the *Presidium*, is responsible for the work between the General Assemblies. The *Secretariat*, which operates under the direction of the Executive Committee, has been located in the Head Office of the Union of Evangelical Churches in Berlin since 1987. (CPCE, 2003.)

This structure is supposed to promote the unity and community of the protestant churches, and it was mainly through theological declarations that CPCE made its voice heard in Europe. A whole series of theological documents, called the Leuenberger Texte/Leuenberg Documents (LD) (1994), have been produced and published over the last two decades, many of which have received widespread attention and acclaim.

Since LA declared that the “reciprocal granting of fellowship in [*sic*] the pulpit and the Lord’s Supper includes the mutual recognition of ordination” (LA, 1973:§ 33), it seemed necessary to clarify this relationship through “further theological work of the ministry” (LA, 1973: § 39). The first two of the Leuenberg documents took up this task and dealt mainly with ecclesiological questions. I shall focus on the so-called Neuendettelsau Theses from 1982/1986 which have been included in the Leuenberg Document 2 (Leuenberger Texte 2, 1994) and can be considered a major step towards a common protestant understanding of ministry and ordination. Here, one can observe a convincing display of the Leuenberg theological method: if a specific question is measured against the core principle – the proclamation of the gospel – and if the practice in question is not against the wider biblical witness then the churches can deal liberally with different traditions and structures. The result is a liberating openness and mutual acceptance without neglecting existing diversity:

Recent research and the agreed position of our churches affirm that it is not possible to establish from the New Testament one single obligatory church order and structure of the ministry. In the New Testament various congregational orders are found; development is also apparent within the New Testament. This gives the churches the freedom to grant reciprocal recognition to differing orders [...] The Lutheran and Calvinist reformations have from the beginning stressed the priesthood of all believers (cf. 1 Peter 2:9). This is founded upon baptism and pertains to being a Christian as such. (LD 2, 1994:30.)

The conception of the Ministry [Amt] does not occur in the New Testament. In its place the New Testament speaks of service and that as a multiplicity of services. According to Paul each Christian has received a gift so as to fulfil a service. Likewise

within the recent ecumenical discussion talk is rightly addressed emphatically to the church's (and the Christian's) service. (LD 2, 1994:30.)

From there, different traditions can be acknowledged: the reformed and the Lutheran viewpoint are mentioned and explained, but since the starting point is that of ministry as "service to the world" (2 Cor. 5:18 ff. – the service of reconciliation), all traditions and structures are to be measured against that core principle. It is thus stated that:

- The word constitutes the ministry, not vice versa.
- The ministry serves word and faith and is there to serve the justification of sinners, not the justification of the church nor the status quo.
- The ministry is connected with the apostolic continuity and unity of the church, its freedom and its love. (LD 2, 1994:31.)

Some common misconceptions are also mentioned and dealt with.

The church is neither founded upon the 'Ministry' (the traditional hierarchical catholic misunderstanding) nor is the 'Ministry' derived from the general priesthood nor established by the congregation itself 'for the sake of order' (a widespread Protestant misunderstanding). The particular ministry is established and given to the church by the Lord (cf. Eph. 4:11). The ministry does not stand above the church, but is a service of the church. The ministry consists in the public proclamation of the word and in the dispensation of the sacraments before the congregation and yet within the congregation, who exercise their functions of priesthood of all believers in prayer, personal witness and service. (LD 2, 1994:31.)

Although the "relation of the ministry instituted by God to the [different] ministries (services) of the church is variable" (LD 2, 1994:32), it is commonly acknowledged that ordination is

... an action of God through the whole people of God: On God's behalf congregation and ordainer operate jointly. With the authorisation to proclaim the word and administer the sacraments the ordained receive the assurance of the Holy Spirit for his [their] service; confirmation and intercession of the congregation sustain them (LD 2, 1994:32).

As far as the "office" or "service" of bishop/episcopé is concerned, the document acknowledges that there exist differences in the way this service has been implemented in the churches. Different models

of “oversight” or visitation are mentioned – be it the Lutheran notion of bishops or the reformed model of presbyteries or synods – but it is unanimously stated that all “Reformation churches acknowledge a service of reciprocal visits (visitation) and of oversight (episkopé)” (LD 2, 1994:32). More important than the question of how this office is named and filled is the common viewpoint “that they [the member-churches] do not regard the churches as founded upon the office of bishop. They understand the ‘service of episkopé’ exclusively as a service to the unity of the church, not as an office [Amt] over the church, but as a service [Dienst] in the church” (LD 2, 1994:32).

And as far as the specific question of apostolic succession is concerned it is stated quite clearly.

Apostolic Succession [Sukzession] is understood in our churches as succeeding [Nachfolge] in the apostolic teaching and mission. This succeeding [Nachfolge] finds its expression in proclamation, teaching and church life. In this sense the continuity whereby the church ordains to the ministry [Dienst] of proclaiming the word and administering the sacraments pertains to this apostolic succession [Nachfolge]. (LD 2, 1994:33.)

With this statement a common understanding of ministry and ordination was expressed, although it has to be conceded that – as already mentioned – the reservations of the Anglican and some of the Scandinavian churches with their strong episcopalian tradition were not quite removed. However, the road to a deeper fellowship and mutual recognition of the ministry among the member churches has been paved through this series of theological documents and has been used since.

Only as a final thought I would like to mention the one very distinct and specific position the theses offer on behalf of the role of women in the church

Neither race nor gender can have decisive significance for the call to the service of public proclamation and administration of sacraments (Galatians 3:27f). Churches in which women are not yet ordained and in which women ministers are not allowed must ask themselves whether this historically conditioned practice corresponds to contemporary Reformation understanding of ministry and congregation. (LC 2, 1994:32.)

And this might sometimes be necessary: not to hide the points in which there are still differences that might affect the core principle, the proclaiming of the gospel to the world.

4. Achievements over the last 35 years

Let us look at some achievements that LA and specifically CPCE have made over the last 35 years. What follows is a subjective and personal impression of how LA and CPCE have made an impact on different levels.

First and foremost: An atmosphere of mistrust, that still could be sensed between the different churches only a few decades ago, has been steadily replaced by an atmosphere of trust and mutual understanding: through contacts, theological work, joint services, mutual visits and partnership programs and the structure of CPCE, which fosters opportunities to meet each other, celebrate with each other and witness together. Through all that, the European churches have indeed grown together without losing their individuality.

Already during the 1970s and 1980s, when relationships between Western and Eastern Europe were still mostly hostile, the Leuenberg Fellowship served as bridge between the churches in their different political environments.

Today, CPCE is, in fact, a truly European voice. Churches from all members of the political EU are present. They speak for their countries, but also in the common European interest and for the common European good.

A very good example for this atmosphere of mutual respect and common witness can be found on CPCE's website, which gives some good insight and useful information. This is networking on a very high and professional level, and much insight can be gained from here.

Probably the strongest point of CPCE are their theological documents, the Leuenberg Documents (LD). They have, over the years, dealt with various important issues, have produced a number of solid theological pieces and have as such received widespread attention and acclaim. The CPCE has rightly been described as a "strong community of teaching" (*eine starke Lehrgemeinschaft*, Schwier, 2000:474), which – for a community of churches – is not a bad compliment in my view.

CPCE has set a good example for other churches which are dealing with the same questions of unity and diversity. Wherever protestant churches are looking for models to shape their relationships, CPCE is a good example to start with. In fact, in 1999 several reformed and Lutheran churches in the USA entered into a Formula of Agreement that was inspired by and modelled on the Leuenberg blueprint.

Theologically speaking, Leuenberg and its theological work has instilled in its membership a common awareness of and focus on several key points from the Christian tradition: an emphasis on human rights, which is based on the conviction that all humans are created equal before God and in his likeness; a focus on the liberating message of the gospel, which sets us as Christians free to live and act without fear in the political, the religious and the secular sphere; and a dedicated concern for the poor and marginalised, which is deeply rooted in the proclamation of Jesus' gospel.

Together with the previous point I would like to stress the focus of CPCE on the minority and often long-suppressed churches. Of course it is valuable to have the big and strong churches in the boat too, but they must never be allowed to patronise or jeopardise the small churches. In this regard, CPCE has certainly lived up to its standards so far.

On a more personal note: Having grown up in a baptist congregation, I felt a distinct spirit of freedom and openness among the protestant churches that I came to know in my home country and abroad. When I took up my studies in theology, I became a member of EKIR (the Rhenish church in Germany, a united church with strong roots in the Lutheran as well as in the reformed tradition). I have ever since enjoyed and cherished the opportunity to celebrate Holy Communion in every protestant church I have visited, and it never occurred to me that it should be otherwise.

The same is true for France and Switzerland (where I have friends and colleagues) – the Table of the Lord was as inviting as the sermons were good and truly protestant. Whenever I listen to a protestant minister or preacher or pastor, I can expect him/her to teach and preach the gospel according to the protestant core principles, and I can expect to be invited to the Lord's Supper and receive the risen Lord in the elements of Holy Communion.

To know what I can expect in a protestant church – be it Lutheran, reformed or united, be it Methodist, Moravian or Waldensian – fills me with pride and a sense of belonging to a greater community of

fellow believers. And, in the same instance, I can cherish the diversity, learn from it, be enriched through it, *and* enjoy coming back to my home church with its specific traditions, liturgy, hymns and styles of devotion and piety. Generally speaking; it seems that the European churches have finally discovered that we do not have to condemn someone else to secure our own position.

To close with an interesting and puzzling observation. The common awareness of LA and CPCE does not really reflect the considerable achievements that have been made. Ask any ordinary church member or even student of theology, and they will probably shrug their shoulders and admit that they haven't even heard of LA or CPCE. The question is whether that should be considered an achievement in itself (because it would mean that former doctrinal disputes and theological damnations are finally a thing of the past), or is it a fact that we have to worry about (because it only goes to show how little people care about the church and important theological questions; cf. Luibl, 2003:73). I would prefer to see it as a good thing – yet it hints at a few shortcomings, which I would like to mention in conclusion.

5. Drawbacks and shortcomings

First of all, Leuenberg and the Leuenberg Movement/CPCE have not met unanimous approval. The reservations of the Anglican and Scandinavian churches have already been mentioned (in section 2). Apart from that, some groups have voiced their concern that Leuenberg threatens the dogmatic foundations of their respective churches and that it violates the protestant core-principle *sola Scriptura* by taking too liberal a stance on issues like the ordination of women, et cetera (for example, the “Bekennnisbewegung ‘*Kein anderes Evangelium*’” [confessional movement “*No other Gospel*”], which consists of groups and individual members from inside and outside the German mainline protestant churches; cf. *Stellungnahme*, 1972/1980). Similar objections have been raised from other, but mostly relatively small, European groups. Since many of those critical reactions focus on the crucial question of hermeneutics and dogmatic purity, they are mostly a reflection of the critique which many of the European mainline churches have to face and deal with anyway.

It can get a bit confusing in Europe sometimes. There are so many church unions, federations, communities or workgroups in Europe or in single European countries that one can easily lose track. Some

countries do have NCCs, others do not. Apart from CPCE, there is – on the European level – the KEK/CEC (Conference of European Churches), which includes, among others, Anglicans, Baptists, and the orthodox churches. Next to LA and CPCE, which does not include the Baptists, we (in Germany) have the Arnoldshain Conference from 1956, which does. There is a regional group along the river Rhine (the Conference of Churches on the Rhine), which is mainly a partnership between French and German churches. Then there is the EECCS (European Ecumenical Commission for Church and Society), and, of course, there are regional workgroups of the WCC and – in Germany alone – different federations between the state churches and the EKD-level. This can get a bit confusing sometimes.

Probably the most nagging question is how far we really have come in terms of inter-church relationships. There are joint services every now and then and on special occasions, but, in general, the fences even between the member churches are still rather high. Again, a personal example: It was much easier for me to move to Pretoria to serve in ELCSA (N-T) than it would have been to move 40 km to the north into our neighbouring church, the EKW (Church of Westphalia). This has mainly to do with financial restraints and questions of personnel management, and yet it still hints at many of the former territorial divisions, reflected in church divisions. In this regard, much is yet to be done, although some first steps have been taken, e.g. student-exchange programs, et cetera.

It is only a very fine line between walking in the same direction and really walking together! It is not always clear, how far CPCE has come in this regard and how deep the roots of this community really are. However, the equilibrium seems to be more stable and not as fragile as it seems to be the case in WCC.

One sometimes has to ask if theological statements are really enough. They have had some impact, without doubt, but I wouldn't assume that they have been widely distributed, read and taken up outside the inner circle of European theologians. To reach the grass-root level, much more has to be done, and I am afraid that there is still much left to do.

This is definitely true in spiritual matters (in a more narrow sense). There are, as I have pointed out, joint services on special occasions. Again, I still consider it to be a blessing in my home church to be able to listen to a reformed pastor, to receive Holy Communion in a Lutheran congregation and thus feel truly united at heart. But liturgy

and spirituality are indeed a matter of the heart and one has to respect that and protect diversity, and, in the same instant, strive for more unity – not an easy task.

Another difficult task is to keep other churches informed and on board – the British churches being a case in point. We want to have them with us in the European Community, and yet we don't want to alienate them from their partner churches in Great Britain (especially the Anglican Church). Obviously, British Methodists have a greater interest in Anglicans than in the Hungarian Reformed Church (or so I guess). But unilateral relations are always dangerous and can sometimes obscure the European picture, especially in countries with powerful non-EPCE-churches (e.g. in "orthodox" countries). CPCE at times really has to struggle hard to focus on *all* member churches and keep them together without losing profile.

CPCE as a whole cannot really be seen as a lay-movement, although, interestingly enough, Europe in its modern form has been shaped by Christians with a strong faith *and* a truly European perspective (like Gustav Heinemann, and others). Could it be that there are only few church leaders with a truly European attitude? That would be a pity.

Maybe the biggest challenge seems to be a typical protestant dilemma. Nobody in protestant circles wants back the Pope (as far as I know) or any highly centralised authority. But who can and who should represent *the* protestant voice in Europe? Or don't we really want a common, strong and audible voice? On the other hand, can it really be otherwise in a truly protestant setting?

Structures do become important, when charismatic individuals are lacking. They are probably even more important, when charismatic individuals try to exert too strong an impact. The personal engagement of such figures (Peter Beyer, Paolo Ricca, and others) has without doubt brought much progress, but in-between there have been times of rather little movement. What should such a European church structure look like, which could support, but also – if necessary – counter the influence of single charismatic individuals? Over the last years, the idea of a pan-European synod came up again and again, but the general assembly of CPCE in Belfast (2001) has clearly ruled that option out for the time being, since that would give CPCE a completely different status and might become an even bigger obstacle for the churches of Scandinavia or Great Britain. This issue will definitely need a lot more time and consideration, and I cannot make out which way the scales are tipping.

All in all, we have to be thankful for Leuenberg and the movement it has brought forth. Despite its humble beginnings (cf. Luibl, 2003:73) and despite its rather low-key prominence in the common protestant awareness, we do experience today true unity between many of the European churches, without aiming for a uniformity that might be difficult to reach and might not even be necessary or desirable. Instead, we have learned to cherish diversity and recognise each other over denominational boundaries as members of the same body of Christ and commissioned with the same task: to spread the gospel and call people into the fellowship of the living Christ.

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siehe LEUENBERGER KONKORDIE

Key concepts:

church unity

Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE)

Leuenberg Agreement

Leuenberg Movement

Kernbegrippe:

Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE)

kerkeenheid

Leuenberg-Beweging

Leuenberg-Ooreenkoms

