



Miracles, wounds and new ways

Europe's churches 20 years after the fall of the Iron Curtain – the South East Europe Group keeps memories alive. By Hans Jürgen Luibl.

It was like a miracle – one keeps hearing this statement when Protestant churches in Eastern and Central Europe think of 1989, the fall of the Iron Curtain. So too at the annual assembly of the South East Europe Group of the CPCE, which consists of 35 churches from the Ukraine to Italy, from south Germany and Switzerland.

The revolution ran a peaceful course and brought freedom: that was a miracle that changed Europe. Freedom was also quite essentially freedom of religion; one might live one's own faith again without surveillance and anxiety, and one could again be the church quite publicly. Klara Tarr from Hungary spoke of a pastor who felled the trees behind which the church lay hidden, the church was there again. When rebuilding a church in Odessa people found in the debris an old figure of Christ: faith that had long been covered in rubble was there again.

Wounds and new ways

But very soon the shadow sides of the new freedom also became evident. An unbridled capitalism overran the countries and made a few rich and many much poorer. The old elites were replaced by new ones which in part were the old, in business, in politics and also in administration. Nor should we forget that the wars in former Yugoslavia were also a consequence of the fall of the Iron Curtain, according to the Methodist pastor Novia Branco from Serbia. Freedom to travel also led the Protestant church in Siebenbürgen to contract from 500,000 to 14,000 faithful by 2009. Pastor Daniel Zikeli points this out – and continues without nostalgia: and each church must go its own way. That is not simple. Certainly the churches are again recognized, in some places they are even getting old property back. But as minority churches they risk being lost sight of in public. The "old" experiences of togetherness in Communist times, the support and neighbourly readiness to help, are no longer there; the dark past, the adaptation to structures unworthy of human beings and also the treachery within the church are a heavy burden. Moreover the churches do not have strength of their own to rebuild: as the young assistant minister Nataliya Kolsnyk, who was four years old at the time of the revolution, remarked, we have no Ukrainian theology of our own, no Ukrainian training. And an old theology in which the ordination of women is rejected makes it impossible for them to be ordained in their church. That would need a special theology to prove the interpretative powers of

the gospel in the changes. Freedom brings pluralism, diversity of opinions, disputes. In the church and in society these cannot simply be reduced, but have to be shaped with argument and counter-argument, with logic and passion. So the churches are slowly learning – also for the benefit of society, which in Europe is becoming increasingly polarized. Here as well as social competence churches are also slowly gaining a new capacity to speak. It is a new kind of miracle: that the way nevertheless leads on, a way which is far stonier than was expected. It is a miracle, according to Daniel Zikeli, a miracle that we are still here today.

Experiences in the West

What seemed like a miracle to the East often caused unbelieving astonishment in the West: the Wall has gone, the Iron Curtain has fallen. With the new freedom to travel the Trabis and Wartburgs came from the East. And they were greeted with joy. But afterwards things became more difficult. The rebuilding of the East had to be financed, and that also led to annoyance in Germany according to Michael Martin, Oberkirchenrat of the Church of Bavaria. Caterina Dupré from the Waldensian Church observed that Europe is also getting a wave of migration from Africa. It was probably such experiences with migration and a failure to integrate, with subventions to the East and a more rapid expansion of the East which in the West led to a rising weariness over Europe, to the point of scepticism about the constitutional procedures of the EU.

These are challenges for a new Europe, viable for the future, twenty years after the fall of the Iron Curtain. The task of the churches cannot be simple here: to remember God's gift of freedom and learn how to deal with it. More sensitivity to God's presence which time and again is surprising and liberating, and more solidarity over and above the frontiers in Europe, old and new – there lie the opportunities for the future.