

CPCE

COMMUNITY OF PROTESTANT CHURCHES IN EUROPE
Unity in reconciled diversity

focus

Half-time for Europe's Protestants

The protestant churches in Europe at half-time: three years after the General Assembly of the 105 CPCE churches in Budapest and three years before the next assembly in Florence, President Thomas Wipf and General Secretary Michael Bunker look back and risk a glimpse into the future.

focus: Dr. Wipf, Bishop Bunker, the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe is on the way to Florence for the seventh General Assembly of its 105 protestant churches in 29 countries. Where does the CPCE want to go? What is its grand goal for 2012?

Thomas Wipf: The CPCE is now known throughout Europe. At the beginning it was more a matter for active specialists and pioneers; that has changed. One challenge is for the CPCE to keep its finger on the pulse of the times and keep asking afresh about its role and task in a changing society. That is the strength of the protestant churches: they operate through the people who are involved at their basis. People, situations and times then can and must change the churches as well: *ecclesia semper reformanda*. So 2012 will be about reform and reformation. We always have to discover in new ways what binds us together.

Michael Bunker: The member churches regard their membership in the CPCE as a natural commitment. They will come together in Florence and can exchange views on what it means to be a CPCE church. Two things are necessary for that: First the continuing strengthening of cooperation at the local level. And then the process of agreeing on decisions at the European level through the CPCE. Each of our churches should also understand itself as a European protestant church. And our people should feel at home when they go into a protestant church anywhere in Europe: here is CPCE. We are a community in worship.

focus: Putting the question another way: What would disappoint you if it were not reached?

Michael Bunker: If the CPCE did not express itself in concrete forms and projects. The ecumenical model of the Leuenberg Concord is the only one that actually functions, so it would be sad if we did not exploit this strength. That strength lies of course in local cooperation, in concrete action. Protestants do not put their trust in the power of an ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Thomas Wipf: I would be disappointed if our inner-protestant profiles hardened in the direction of new demarcations instead of seeking further for what is common to the Reformation churches. However, I am confident that we are on a good path.

focus: The last General Assembly commissioned a range of tasks. How do they look – and what are the most important pieces of work?

Thomas Wipf: In Budapest the churches did indeed entrust us with a large packet of tasks. The churches emerging from the Reformation were always very ambitious. I can however say with conviction: We are in a good position. Many things could already be put into effect in the first three years. CPCE itself has developed further in these years, not least through more conscious engagement on the part of the member churches. All this together offers a good foundation for the future.

Michael Bunker: More than two thirds of the tasks are completed or well on the way. In Budapest we couldn't yet reckon with that. The churches that put people at our disposal deserve many thanks. Our council too has been very constructive. Among the most important tasks are of course the doctrinal conversations. The questions of the significance of ordained ministry and of the Bible and the confessions: two weighty themes of the Leuenberg Concord which are central in ecumenical dialogue. Then I would emphasise here the significance of the two consultation processes involving younger people from our churches who are dealing with social challenges and church reform processes. CPCE is thus so far as I can see the only ecumenical institution which makes young people responsible in this way for central tasks. The younger generation can only then be the future of the churches if it is taken seriously in the present. Lastly is important among many other things the series of consultations on "Training for the Ordained Ministry". By its end we should have an agreement of the churches and theological faculties in Europe on the future of theological study. From the work already prescribed before Budapest we are still also busy with the spread and realisation of the doctrinal conversation on "The protestant profile in the missionary task of the churches in Europe".

Thomas Wipf: I would also like to mention the regional groups, i.e. the concentration of the work of CPCE in regions wedded by language and geography. The Concord spoke of "common witness and service". The regional groups are a very important forum to call themes, impulses and realities of European Protestantism to life in their respective contexts.

focus: The protestant voice in Europe: This motto was stamped at the General Assemblies in Belfast 2001 and Budapest 2006. Has public awareness of CPCE changed?

Thomas Wipf: Public social and political debate in many countries is also influenced by the protestant churches. Thus we have taken an active part in the discussion of the future of the EU Treaty. We have directed specific demands to politics in the light of current challenges. We have issued statements on freedom of religion and freedom of opinion, on human rights, on inter-cultural dialogue. Just at the moment we are preparing a statement on euthanasia. In all this we hope to offer the leadership of churches theological orientation and help in political processes. Our position will also include specific examples applying to dealing with people in situations of crisis. We have made the voice of the protestant churches audible. That corresponds to a commission from our churches. It was and is their wish that the voice of CPCE is audible and heard. Incidentally, we do not only observe this in our churches; CPCE is also a known quantity to journalists in many countries today.

Michael Bunker: In times of increasing pressures in Europe the voice of Protestantism is a voice of freedom. It is our task as churches to make this voice heard. However, our specific

view and opinions do not remain isolated, for we feed our involvement into the Conference of European Churches. It has the responsibility to gather our protestant voice together with those of other church families and then to represent that to Europe's political public.

focus: On the question of other church families: How does CPCE present itself to these other churches and to ecumenical organisations?

Michael Bunker: The ecumenical model of the Leuenberg Concord – unity in reconciled diversity – is transferrable; we can see that in South America, the USA and the Near East. Documents and agreements have emerged there on the basis of the Concord. That should make us self-aware and colour our cooperation with other churches. Confessionality is an important presupposition, but on the other hand not enough to constitute the church of Jesus Christ in the globalised world. That is why we seek dialogue. We have good contact with the Orthodox and Baptist churches and there is also contact with the Anglican churches. There is much that we could also discuss with the Roman Catholic Church on the matter of developing church community.

focus: Why is that dialogue not happening?

Thomas Wipf: Our invitation stands. During the European Ecumenical Assembly in Sibiu two years ago we invited the Roman Catholic Church to a dialogue, but have not yet had an answer.

focus: Back to Ecumenics: How do the other confessional organisations benefit from the CPCE?

Michael Bunker: The world ecumenical alliances have in CPCE both a reliable partner and a source of impulses, and that through the Leuenberg Concord. The Concord laid the foundations for common witness and service, but the world alliances have not yet drawn the final conclusions.

focus: What would these conclusions be?

Thomas Wipf: Coming closer both materially and structurally. This was already once envisaged in plans for a common general assembly of the Reformed and Lutheran World Alliances, which however did not take place. For ecumenical dialogue we need conversation-partners who are sufficiently self-aware to be definable. It is good for the protestant churches that through the CPCE they are also becoming ever more self-aware. That brings them closer together.

Thomas Flügge asked the questions.