

## European Protestants start to reflect on the first year of the pandemic

**More than 80 representatives of Protestant churches met online for a virtual conference 17–19 March 2021. Participants from more than 20 countries discussed how churches have experienced and responded to the corona pandemic so far.**

The consultation organised by the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE), the European Region of the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) and the Protestant Church in Switzerland (PCS) started off with speakers from Spain, Sweden, Hungary and Great Britain describing how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their churches. Next, Professor Torsten Meireis from Berlin presented a brand new guide produced by the CPCE's Advisory Board on Ethics<sup>1</sup> detailing the ethical challenges posed by the pandemic in theological, social and healthcare terms and highlighting potential approaches that churches might adopt.

The participants then split into working groups to examine some of the churches' fields of action more closely – worship in practice, Christian witness in society, diaconal work, and practising communion and solidarity. Professor Ulrich Körtner from Vienna rounded off the event with his detailed outlook based on 2 Timothy 1:7, “For God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of consideration.”

With the aid of a major digital drive, the churches have succeeded in finding creative and impressive solutions for worship in the face of the ban on social gatherings – whether majority or minority churches, both in town and country. They also ramped up their pastoral care and diaconal work to aid isolated and elderly people and their concerned family members. The restrictions imposed upon funerals and the ban on singing proved considerably more difficult to bear and were perceived by many as infringements of religious freedom and civil rights. Repercussions of the pandemic such as domestic violence, the risk of increasing educational inequalities and the globally widening gap in access to vaccines have been actively countered by churches. The participants criticised the frequently evident prioritisation of economic freedom over the individual right to health care and the widespread focus on physical rather than mental health during the crisis. This was cited as one of the lessons that the churches had learned and would be bearing in mind during the ongoing evaluation of this difficult period. They stated that the aim isn't to return to “former” normality, but to consider the lasting effects of the crisis. At the same time, a new equilibrium needs to be found and nurtured between social, ecological and economic sustainability and equity.

The question as to how far the churches consider themselves to be “relevant to the system”, or reclaim this role for themselves, was finely elaborated – with relevance to the system in a political sense not to be deemed an indicator of how far the churches fulfil the mission of God's Gospel. The churches are called upon to counter the apocalyptic visions of some predictions by exercising power, love and consideration to counter both panicked fear of the virus and the absolute belief in medical advances in a zero-risk society. The pandemic also asks questions about our image of God. The crisis should not be considered as a punishment from God, but certainly as a test of faith in the one Word of God “that we need to listen to, trust and obey, in life and in death” (Heidelberg Catechism). The spirit of power, love and consideration in no way means carelessness, emotional rapture or inertia, but – in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words – drawing upon the resurrection of Christ and the hope imparted by Easter to announce a new, cleansing wind blowing into our present-day world.

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<sup>1</sup> Being church together in a pandemic, Focus 29 (E/2021) by the CPCE; <https://www.leuenberg.eu/being-church-together-in-a-pandemic>

We plan to conduct a further, face-to-face conference in October in Rome (further details to follow in summer 2021). The conference papers can be accessed [on the CPCE's website/here. \(link\)](#)