

Final Report of the 5th General Assembly of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship (19–25 June 2001 in Belfast)

From 19th to 25th June 2001, the 5th General Assembly of the Churches of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship was held at Queen's University, Belfast, at the invitation of the local member churches. The delegates met at a critical time in the development of the Peace Process – the politicians who had hoped to attend the opening service of the Assembly had to absent themselves at the last moment because of the need to engage in talks. The marching season was also approaching and during the stay there were serious episodes of sectarian violence in North Belfast. The Assembly was concerned to offer solidarity and support to those who were working for peace and conflict resolution. On Sunday, the delegates visited local congregations in Belfast and in surrounding villages. There were signs of hope.

At the opening the Assembly was greeted by the Archbishop of Armagh, the Most Revd Sean Brady, the Auxiliary Bishop of Down and Connor, Anthony Farquhar, and by Ronald Appleton, the President of the local Jewish congregation. The Assembly was also received by the Mayor of Belfast.

In small groups, the delegates visited local projects where practical steps are being taken towards reconciliation, often across church and community divides. The Assembly was informed about the situation and discussed this difficult topic in plenary. The Assembly expresses its appreciation of the hospitality and assures the people and churches of this area of its solidarity (Appendix 1).

1. Witness and service: a Protestant voice in Europe

Accepting the resolutions of the 1994 General Assembly and in accordance with the principles of the Leuenberg Agreement on joint witness and service to the world (esp. nos. 29 and 39), the 2001 Belfast General Assembly wants to create the conditions for the Leuenberg Church Fellowship to be strengthened in the concrete fulfilment of this task. The aim is to discuss together the theological and ethical aspects and the humanitarian consequences of political decisions from the perspective of the gospel, to bring Protestant voices together on fundamental questions, and to allow them to speak and be heard in the European public arena.

The Leuenberg Church Fellowship should be put in a position of being able to give a clear Protestant witness on important current questions of politics, society and ecumenical matters, in a way which is more prominent and up-to-date than it has been previously. In particular it needs to build up the presence of the Protestant churches at a European level. Here use needs to be made of already existing structures and forms of co-operation, especially the Conference of European Churches. These structures and forms of co-operation should be deepened. Moreover the Leuenberg Church Fellowship needs a network of information - especially through the Internet - in which it is possible for all churches to get full reciprocal information about important current themes.

In order to take new steps along this way the General Assembly resolves that the regional churches shall be asked with the approval of the Executive Committee to hold individual forums or regular consultations on important themes which cross frontiers. Such themes might include bioethics, peace ethics, the situation of ethnic and religious minorities, education and training, 'Leuenberg' and the church federations, and relations with the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. The Executive Committee should receive the results of such consultations and circulate them further.

The Executive Committee can also appoint task groups for limited periods made up of experts from the churches, politics and society and receive the results of their work.

It remains the special task of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship to deepen the shared understanding of the gospel in theological conversations about doctrine. This also includes an effort to arrive at a common ethical decision not only on questions relating to the foundations of theological ethics, but also on

questions of applied ethics. Along the lines of the 'Charta Oecumenica' of the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and the European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE), the Leuenberg Church Fellowship is involved in ecumenical dialogue on ethical questions. At the same time theological conversations about doctrine should work out the specifically Protestant presuppositions and criteria for ethical decision-making; these need to be presented more clearly in ecumenical conversations and to the European public. The concept of the freedom of the gospel, the relationship of freedom and love as in the doctrine of justification, the concept of the conscience and the formation of a Protestant conscience in accordance with the gospel, together with a Protestant understanding of responsibility, are fundamental here. Furthermore there needs to be a clear focus on those themes from the wealth of problems in politics, social ethics, economics and culture which have priority for Protestants. Here it is important to continue the theological work.

The General Assembly instructs the Executive Committee as soon as possible to prepare appropriate means for promoting the active participation of the member churches in the public debate on the future of Europe. Here special attention should be paid to the following themes: the specific tasks of the churches in Europe, the image of Europe in the churches, the relationship between Europe as a whole and the European Union, the way in which the churches participate in the debate on a European constitution, and their expectations of the coming expansions in the EU. These questions have become particularly urgent for the General Assembly as a result of the presentation of the book edited on behalf of the Executive Committee, *Unternwegs nach Europe - En Route towards Europe*, in which individual themes have already been discussed.

The Executive Committee is also instructed, in close consultation with all member churches, to develop further against the background of these requests the ways in which the Leuenberg Church Fellowship works and to reflect on their effectiveness. This should lead to consultation with all member churches in the processes of communication and decision-making within the Leuenberg Church Fellowship and in results and statements which are binding. A new cycle of General Assemblies should also be devised, along with a different designation which brings out more clearly the character of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship as a fellowship of Protestant churches.

The projects and results of the work from the sphere of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship will be discussed in the Presidium and the Executive Committee and passed on to the relevant secular institutions or church organizations, especially the Conference of European Churches.

With these resolutions the General Assembly wants to help the voice of the Protestant Churches in Europe to be heard more clearly. Though the formation of a European Protestant Synod is not seen as an appropriate means by most member churches at the present time, discussions about deepening the fellowship and making it visible in a new form among the members of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship should be stimulated, in order to further collaboration in the ecumenical world. Because the Leuenberg Church Fellowship so far has dispensed with some elements of a formal church constitution, and conversation on this question is not yet finished, it depends all the more on the loyalty of the member churches and their receptiveness. The Leuenberg Church Fellowship is grateful for the encouragement from the churches to take this new way and therefore asks the signatory churches to contribute to these decisions and to fill them with life. 'Jesus Christ liberates us for common service' (LA 36).

2. Theological study

2.1 Receiving the results of studies

In response to the Leuenberg Agreement (no.38), the 4th General Assembly in Vienna resolved that: ‘The commitment to common theological work should remain the core task of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship, so that the common understanding of the Gospel may be deepened, examined in light of the Holy Bible and thus actualized.’ The following themes were to have priority:

- Law and gospel, especially with relation to decision-making on ethical questions.
- Church, people, state and nation
- The church and Israel

On the instructions of the Executive Committee doctrinal conversation groups set to work, and their findings were presented to the 5th General Assembly in Belfast.

The document ‘Church and Israel’ was received and accepted by the General Assembly with gratitude. The General Assembly asks the churches to accept the result of the doctrinal conversation and to take note of it in Christian-Jewish dialogue and in their own work on the theme of the church and Israel.

With this document, for the first time since the Reformation the Protestant churches in Europe have together expressed what can be said today about the relationship between the church and Israel and the collaboration of Christians and Jews on the basis of the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and church doctrine. The General Assembly is aware that the last word on this theme has not yet been said, but believes that the discussion can be continued well on the basis of this study.

The document ‘Church-People-State-Nation. A Contribution to a Difficult Relationship’, the result of the discussions of the South and Southeastern regional group of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship, was gratefully received by the General Assembly. The document investigates the question how the relationship between church, people, state and nation can be understood and shaped in a theologically responsible way, and what can be expected as the contribution of Protestantism to building up democratic forms of the state in a Europe which is growing together.

The General Assembly asks the churches to accept the result of the doctrinal conversation and in further works to take note of the theme of ‘Church-People-State-Nation’.

The results of the deliberations of the doctrinal conversation group on ‘Law and Gospel’ were gratefully noted by the General Assembly. The document describes the differing understanding of law and gospel as this appears today in the traditions of churches of a Lutheran, Reformed and Methodist hallmark. Here despite all the differences, common theological elements emerged, on the basis of which reciprocal questions will be formulated. It considers problematic developments and distortions in the understanding of law and gospel, and at the same time draws attention to typical standpoints in ethical decision-making by the Protestant churches; it investigates new perspectives on the relation between law and gospel which will be relevant for shaping Christian life in this world.

The General Assembly resolved to forward the text to the Leuenberg Churches for comment: it instructs the Executive Committee on the basis of the comments received to entrust the existing redactional group with the final redaction and to present the finished text to the churches for reception before the next General Assembly.

2.2 New doctrinal conversations

The General Assembly resolves to work on the following new themes in doctrinal conversation groups. These themes arose from deliberations in the churches and during the ‘open space’ method at the General Assembly.

(a) ‘The Form and Shape of the Protestant Churches in a Changing Europe’

Questions about the form and shape of the Protestant churches are subordinate to the insight that the foundation of the church lies in God's saving action in Jesus Christ. This distinction between the ground of the church's faith and the forms of churches gives scope for formation. At the same time, however, it also requires theological agreement on the criteria for the formation; moreover questions about formation need to be taken more seriously, so that church fellowship can be realized and deepened. A thorough discussion of questions of form is called for, especially on the basis of the present processes of transformation in society and in the churches of Europe. The study must make clear what in the Reformation view are the specific characteristics of church fellowship.

(b) 'The Missionary Task of the Churches in Europe'

The churches in Europe see themselves together faced with the challenge of proclaiming the gospel to the people of Europe. What role do the churches of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship assume within this common task? We have a common understanding of the gospel which has its centre in the doctrine of justification. The open question is how the gospel can be preached in such a way that the form chosen corresponds to the content. The aim should be to reinforce trust in the gospel and its life-giving power, communicating the different experiences in different parts of Europe and binding together the truth of our theological doctrine, the spiritual life in our churches and the practical work which is done in social services. The Executive Committee is asked to set up a working group which can help also to advance these themes.

2.3 The binding force of decisions and their reception in the churches and communities

The General Assembly was aware of the problem of what binding force the whole work of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship - and especially the doctrinal conversations - has. This question is closely bound up with that of the reception of the decisions arrived at. **In order to heighten this binding force and to improve reception with a view to facilitating ongoing theological work, the doctrinal conversation groups are asked at the end of each of their texts to summarize the contents; this will also be a help towards work on them in the synods of the signatory churches. Aids for educating communities about the results of the doctrinal conversations should be developed, so that communities are made more familiar with the texts.**

The existence of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship is still too little known in the communities. **Therefore the General Assembly asks the Executive Committee to call on the churches to organize a special commemoration of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship within the framework of the Reformation Festival or on an appropriate Sunday in order to bring its activities and standpoint into the discussion. The General Assembly asks the Executive Committee to set up a working group to work out the materials for such a service.**

The presence of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship in European regional church meetings and Kirchentage should be strengthened, so as to encourage regional exchanges and encounters.

A working group of the General Assembly urged that visits of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship to the minority churches should be encouraged. The different confessions should be represented in this service of visiting.

The Executive Committee requests those signatory churches which have not yet done so to appoint a 'Leuenberg official' with the specific task of facilitating the transmission of information, communication and the formation of opinion in the churches of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship.

The possibilities offered by the Internet could be used even better for reception. **In this connection the General Assembly confirmed the resolution of the Executive Committee of 15 July 2000 which provides for arranging collaboration with the Johannes a Lasco Library (JALB) in Emden, implementing the presentation on the Internet and online publication of relevant texts, and adopting and developing further the model of the a Lasco 'Reformed Online' for the project of a**

'Network of Protestant Churches in Europe'. Here the JALB is to provide the personal and technical infrastructure. The Executive Committee is instructed to set up the legal and financial framework. The General Assembly instructs the Executive Committee, in collaboration with the JALB and other suitable institutions, to ensure that as soon as possible those member churches which so far have no access to the Internet are enable to have this.

3. Ecumenical responsibility

The churches of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship have 'as part of their responsibility to promote the ecumenical fellowship of all Christian churches' (LA no.46). The Belfast General Assembly too recognizes its responsibility here and sets its tasks within the framework of this responsibility.

3.1 Participation of the Methodist Churches of Europe

The General Assembly notes with joy and gratitude that the Vienna declaration which it approved in 1994 ('Declaration on Church Fellowship with the Methodists') has been accepted by the signatory churches. As this also happened on the Methodist side, it was now possible for the first time, after the implementation of this agreement (in September 1996 – officially confirmed on 2 February 1997 with a festal service in the Methodist Advent Church in Tallinn), for the Methodist Churches to take part in the General Assembly: these comprised the Methodist Church (Central Conference, Germany); the Methodist Church (Central Conference Central and Southern Europe), The Methodist Church (Central Conference, Northern Europe), The Methodist Church in Great Britain, and the Methodist Church in Ireland.

3.2 New signatory churches

The General Assembly notes with joy and gratitude that since the General Assembly in Vienna the following churches have subscribed to the Leuenberg Agreement:

- The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia and Other States
- The Evangelical Church in Germany
- The Lutheran Church of Norway
- The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark.

It therefore asks for further conversations to be carried on with the churches of the Lutheran and Reformed tradition which have not subscribed to the Leuenberg Agreement, especially with those which are already participating in the work of doctrinal conversations.

3.3 Dialogue with the Baptists

In respect of the dialogue with the Baptists the General Assembly welcomes the preliminary conversations which have already taken place. It accepts the proposal that a theological dialogue should be carried on with the Baptist Churches. Starting with the problem of baptism, questions should be worked on which need to be clarified if reciprocal church fellowship is to be granted. This dialogue carried on in the name of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship should also be accompanied in the various signatory churches by national dialogues and new forms of collaboration. **In order to prepare for the new quality of fellowship with the Baptist churches that is desired, the General Assembly resolves that representatives of the Baptist churches should take part in the doctrinal conversations with a guest status (Appendix 2).**

3.4 Dialogue with the Anglicans

On the basis of the fellowship in word and sacrament which has already been achieved in some European countries between the Anglican, the Lutheran and the Reformed churches (Porvoo, Meissen, Reuilly), the General Assembly asks for a dialogue to be held between the Leuenberg Church Fellowship and the Anglican Communion at a European level. In it reference should be

made to the theological foundation worked out at a first consultation (Liebfrauenberg, 6-10 September 1995; cf. Leuenberg Texts 4, pp.11-18).

4. Organizational and structural measures

The General Assembly elected an Executive Committee consisting of 13 persons, each with a deputy (Appendix 3). The deputies are to be more involved in the work of the Executive Committee and entrusted with specific tasks.

The General Assembly confirms the tasks of the Executive Committee which were decided on in Vienna in connection with the convening of the General Assembly – but in the circumstances in shorter periods of time – and the choice of Presidents, the special tasks of the Executive Committee and the establishment and equipping of the Secretariat. In addition there are the new tasks which have already been mentioned.

The fellowship experienced in Belfast gives the General Assembly the hope that the Leuenberg Church Fellowship can also rely on the support of the churches in the future - both financially and also in the promotion of themes. This too serves to make the Leuenberg Church Fellowship deeper and more visible, something to which the signatory churches to the agreement have committed themselves.

'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' (LA no. 29).

Appendix 1

Sharing Experience – Sharing Hope

Message to the churches in Ireland from the Leuenberg Church Fellowship of Lutheran, Reformed, United and Methodist Churches

The Leuenberg Church Fellowship thanks the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Methodist Church in Ireland and the Lutheran Church in Ireland for their invitation to hold its 5th General Assembly in Belfast and for their generous hospitality. Having as our theme “Reconciled Diversity”, we appreciated the participation in the opening ceremony of most major churches in Ireland, including the Most Rev Sean Brady, Archbishop of Armagh, symbolizing our ecumenical relationship with other Christian traditions in Ireland.

We believe with all our heart that reconciliation is possible because God first reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ. With this conviction the churches of the Leuenberg Fellowship have been striving for a long time and are still striving to live in unity while accepting each other in our differences. Here in Belfast we have had the opportunity to listen to people who are involved in the work of reconciliation. They shared with us their experiences of helping people gain new perspectives for their personal lives and for their communities, and break out of the spiral of fear and mistrust. We admire their dedication and humility, their endurance in the face of so many difficulties and frustrations. This encourages us to continue in our work of reconciliation in the Leuenberg Fellowship.

In this context and at this moment in history, the Assembly of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship

- extends its deep sympathy to all those who have suffered as a result of the conflict;
- supports all grass roots activities which develop trust and confidence between the different traditions, because no political settlement can ever work without the building of bridges between the traditions;
- encourages the political leaders to continue their hard work to develop a peace process where people of all traditions may feel at home in this land.

We send our greetings to all the churches in Ireland and thank the many congregations who received us as guests at their morning services.

We pray for the people of Ireland that, after travelling so far along the road of reconciliation, their hopes for a peaceful future may come true.

Appendix 2

Dialogue with the Baptists

The Assembly warmly welcomes the unanimous decisions of the Council of the European Baptist Federation of 22-24 September 2000 regarding contacts with the Leuenberg Church Fellowship. The Assembly agrees that representatives of the Baptist Unions should be invited to attend as participant observers and permanent guests within future programme of doctrinal conversations held by the LCF. The invitations to participate shall be directed to the European Baptist Federation's Executive Committee. The Assembly hopes to involve a broad range of Baptist Unions across the whole of Europe.

The Assembly takes note of the report of the Elstal Consultation (24-25 February 2000) with gratitude, with its valuable survey of the extensive common ground between Baptist, Lutheran, Reformed and Methodist Churches. Recognizing that there are indeed 'good reasons for the wish for better mutual knowledge and understanding' and desiring to take an initiative for more co-operation, the Assembly requests the Executive Committee, in consultation with the member churches of the LCF, to open a theological dialogue with representatives of Baptist Unions belonging to the European Baptist Federation with the aim of discovering whether a basis can be found for the respective churches and unions to deepen and extend the communion which already exists between them. Such a theological dialogue need not be confined to the doctrine and practice of Baptism, but should extend to any other issues which are perceived on either side to stand in the way of mutual church fellowship.

The Assembly notes the conviction of the participants in the Elstal Consultation that conversations at the national level should accompany and support this form of co-operation and dialogue, and encourages member churches to strengthen and deepen their contacts with Baptist Unions and churches active on their respective territories, with a view to deeper mutual understanding and common witness and service in those ways the Holy Spirit shall direct.

Appendix 3

Executive Committee, Presidium, Secretary

A. Members of the Executive Committee

1. Bishop Dr. Mihály Márkus, Hungary, Reformed
2. OKR (senior church official) Dr. Michael Bünker, Austria, Lutheran
3. Director Dr. Peter Bukowski, Germany, Reformed
4. Prof. Michael Beintker, Germany, United
5. OKR Doris Damke, Germany, United
6. President Dr. Friedrich Hauschildt, Germany, Lutheran
7. Revd Piotr Gaš, Poland, Lutheran
8. Prof. Willy Willems, Belgium, Reformed
9. General Secretary Ane Hjerrild, Denmark, Lutheran
10. Church President Thomas Wipf, Switzerland, Reformed
11. Prof. Elisabeth Parmentier, France, Lutheran
12. Revd Fleur Houston, Britain, Reformed
13. Revd Nigel Collinson, Britain, Methodist

B. Deputies of the Executive Committee

1. Dean Dezsö Zoltán Adorjáni, Romania, Lutheran
2. Revd Winfrid Pfannkuche, Italy, Waldensian Church
3. OKR Cordelia Kopsch, Germany, United
4. OKR Antje Heider-Rottwilm, Germany, United
5. Bishop Dr. Martin Hein, Germany, United
6. Prof. Heinrich Holze, Germany, Lutheran
7. Archbishop Dr. Jaan Kiivit, Estonia, Lutheran
8. General Secretary Dr. Bas Plaisier, the Netherlands, Reformed
9. Revd Olav Fykse Tveit, Norway, Lutheran
10. Revd Dr. Gottfried Locher, Switzerland, Reformed
11. Revd Dr. François Clavairoly, France, Reformed
12. Prof. John Cecil McCullough, Northern Ireland, Reformed
13. Bishop Dr. Walter Kläiber, Germany, Methodist

C. Presidium (elected by the Executive Committee on 24 June 2001)

1. Prof. Elisabeth Parmentier (Executive President)
2. Prof. Michael Beintker
3. Church President Thomas Wipf

D. Director of the Secretariat (elected by the Executive Committee on 24 June 2001)

President Dr. Wilhelm Hüffmeier, Germany, United

The Secretariat remains at the Head Office of the Evangelical Church of the Union,
Jebensstr.3, D-10623 Berlin.