

focus



General Assembly 2024



focus 31 • Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe CPCE

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Impressum

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Foreword

The General Assembly, which takes place every six years, is the highlight in the life of the CPCE. This time it took place in the heart of Romania, in Sibiu. The focus thus turned to a region that people from a Western and Central European perspective have little insight into and which must cope with its own challenges with migration, minorities and population loss. This different environment allowed us to broaden our own horizons.

All the participants came to the Assembly with their social background, their theological traditions, their personal and confessional concerns and ideas. There was discussion, singing, decision-making, voting, laughter and sometimes struggle. Through attentive and unprejudiced listening, where the presence of the Holy Spirit was repeatedly felt, solutions could be found and the ecumenical nature of the CPCE could be felt and experienced.

President John Bradbury, to whom I am grateful for his work over the past years, moderated the General Assembly with great sensitivity. Alongside Miriam Rose and Marcin Brzoska of the CPCE Presidium, he has served as the Executive President of the CPCE in the years since the last General Assembly in Basel in 2018. Together with the Council, they steered the church communion professionally and with great commitment through important events such as the 50th anniversary of the Leuenberg Agreement in 2023, but also through the Covid-19 pandemic. Although the pandemic made the work more difficult, all of the CPCE's work processes were brought to successful ends.

The General Assembly not only received the results of the work of the last six years, but also identified the topics to be worked on in the next six years. These include fundamental theological questions such as the Christian image of man and practical challenges for the churches such as passing on the faith and making better use of digital means of communication. Ecumenical dialogues, such as that with the European Baptist Federation, or the further deepening of the church communion as a communion of solidarity through church aid projects, are also on the list of priorities. The newly elected Council in Sibiu will now specify the various processes and set priorities.

A constructive working atmosphere requires a number of ingredients: preparation of the content, a smooth organizational process and all the aspects that hold body and soul together. Good food, beautiful music, shared experiences and places to meet are also part of it. The CPCE Head Office, together with its member churches and the



host churches, made this possible. Personally, I, along with many other participants, experienced the General Assembly as inspiring and encouraging.

Immerse yourself once again in the content and locations of the General Assembly with this booklet and let yourself be infected by the “CPCE spirit”!

Yours,

Rita Famos

Executive President of the CPCE

Sibiu as host of the General Assembly

One of the most beautiful cities in Romania, where, in addition to Romanian, numerous German- and Hungarian-language plaques, inscriptions, and local business names can be found, served as the venue for the 9th General Assembly of the CPCE.



Monument to the Transylvanian governor Samuel Brukenthal, in front of the museum of the same name. The German-language secondary school, where portions of the General Assembly took place, is also named after him.

If you take a stroll through the old town of Sibiu, you could just as easily be in any other Central European city: baroque houses, cozy archways, medieval market squares, romantic fortifications. A café or souvenir shop awaits visitors around every corner.

“Young – since 1191”

There are also a wide variety of cultural events, concerts and markets, which attract numerous visitors! 566,595 tourists visited the city in 2024 alone. 5,121 guest rooms are available in the city and the surrounding fortified church landscape. But there are downsides. A beer can cost as much as 5 euros, which a teacher with a monthly net income of 3,900 lei (780 euros) cannot afford often.

Once you walk away from the center of town, you notice other accents. The Balkan Zibinsmarkt – from which you can see the massive tower of the Gothic cathedral – offers sheep’s cheese, fresh garden tomatoes, and wooden spoons directly alongside Chinese rubber boots and Turkish plastic vats. The cheaply-made post-communist buildings on the outskirts sometimes look as if building regulations weren’t a consideration. And behind it all, the backdrop is the eternally snow-capped mountain range of the Carpathians, unbothered by the developments taking place below. The city has given itself a motto that aims to combine old and new, dynamism and tradition: “Young since 1191”. The city of 135,000 inhabitants, with three names – Sibiu, Hermannstadt, Nagyszeben – sometimes makes its way onto the global stage. In 2007, it was the European Capital of Culture. In the same year, it hosted the 3rd European Ecumenical Assembly. In 2019, it hosted a meeting of EU heads of state and government.



Colorful, flowery, striped, traditional or modern plates, jugs and cups at the pottery market in Sibiu.

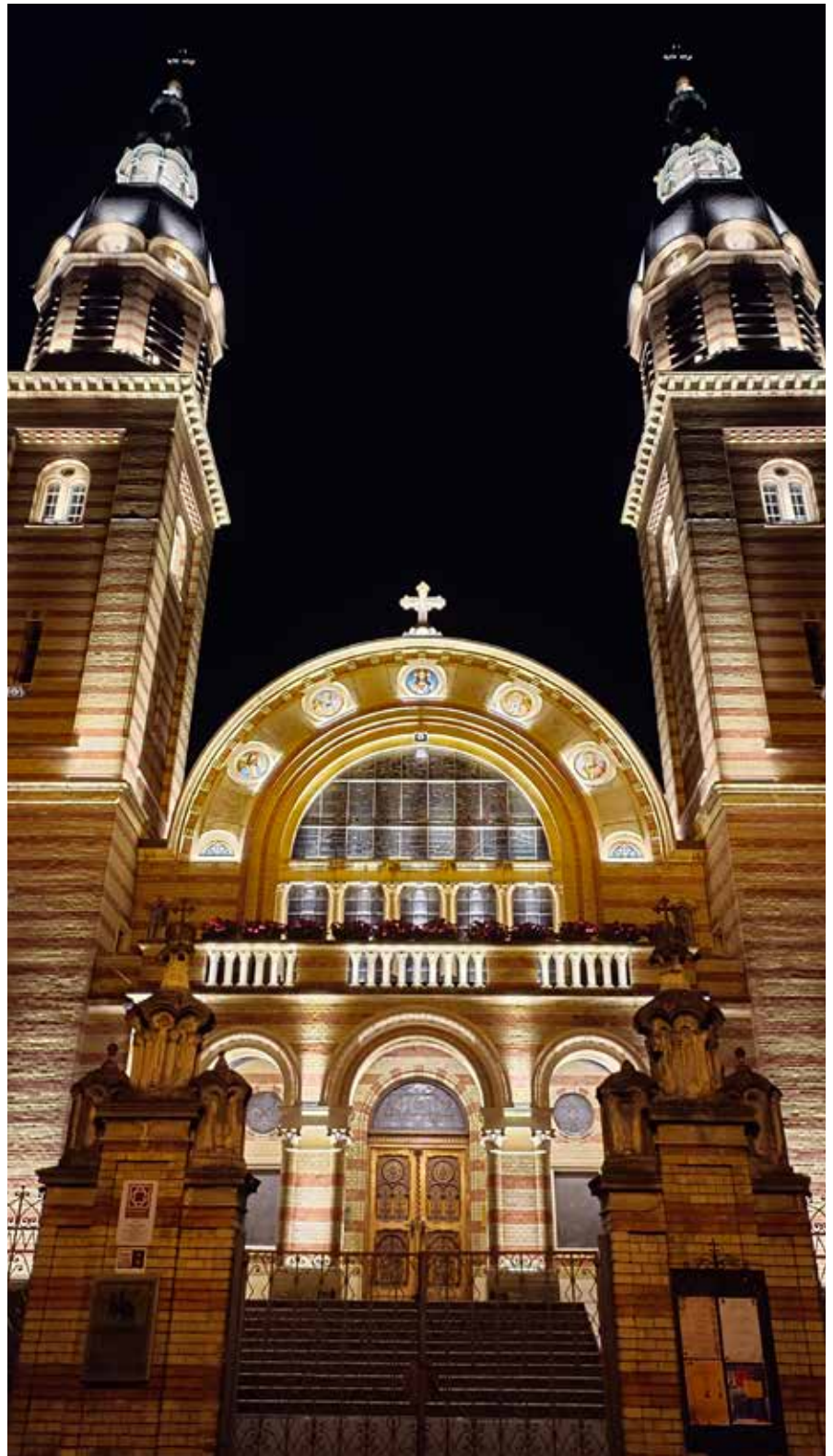
CPCE General Assembly in the multi-ethnic and multi-confessional city

Multi-confessionalism is at home here. The Protestant Bishop's Office is close to the Romanian Orthodox Metropolis. From the Protestant cathedral of the 12th century, it takes five minutes to reach the Orthodox Cathedral, built as a miniature of the Hagia Sophia. This route runs directly past the Roman Catholic and Reformed churches. However, multi-confessionality is not automatically ecumenism. Too much separates the Romanian Orthodox from the Hungarian Reformed and the Transylvanian Saxon Lutherans. Even if you add the Pentecostal Roma to the fold, who have built their places of worship on the outskirts of the city, the full spectrum of confession is still not represented. Every church and ethnic group has its own agenda. They come together in a very friendly way when there is something to celebrate. However, ecumenism looks different.

The Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe chose this city as the venue for its ninth General Assembly. For a short time, the heart of the city beat in rhythm with the heart of the CPCE. The Gothic Cathedral became a plenary hall, the venerable Brukenthal Secondary School housed the working groups, the chapter house was converted into a conference office, and the Reformed Church was used as a prayer room. The Ferula of the Cathedral proved to be a good room for coffee breaks.

The central churchyard connected all the places and developed into a meeting place in the sunny light of late summer. And the rest of the city? It served the delegates on many a mild evening to relieve stress or as a space for inspiring thoughts. It never let them go...

Thank you Sibiu! Danke Hermannstadt!
Mulțumesc Sibiu! Köszönöm szépen
Nagszeben!



The Orthodox Cathedral is modeled after the Hagia Sophia. Unfortunately, there was no ecumenical encounter at the General Assembly.

A day in the life of t



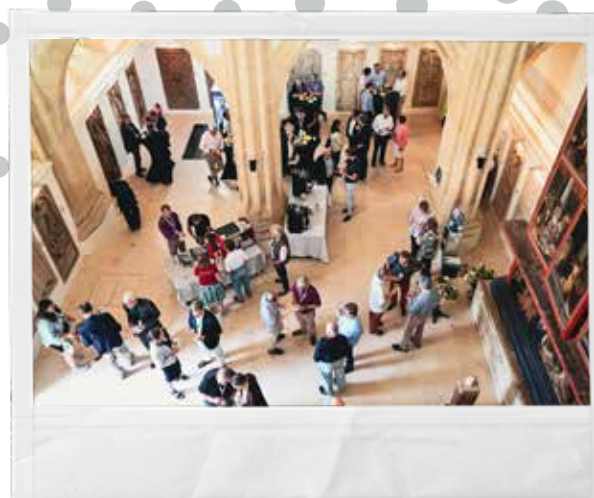
There were numerous opportunities to praise and thank God together. Participants were shown how real the ideas of pulpit fellowship and communion are among member churches in Romania and the rest of Europe, ideas set forth 51 years ago in the Leuenberg Agreement. Lutherans, Reformed, United and Methodists gathered each morning at the Reformed Church in Sibiu to attend the daily morning prayers.



The informal coffee breaks took place in the Café Wien.



The decision to hold the plenary sessions, midday prayers, and opening and closing services at the same location, in the cathedral of Sibiu, was not only a logistical one, but also a symbolic one. The fact that the decisions about the future of the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe were made in a cathedral constantly reminded the participants of the Assembly's relationship to God.



The venerable Ferula, a Gothic hall attached to the west side of the church, was used for the formal coffee breaks.

the General Assembly



On Sunday, congregations throughout central Romania invited the participants to join in their services, which were conducted in the languages predominant in the region.



In classic CPCE fashion, worship was not only experienced. The future of worship in the member churches was also discussed at various points during the meeting. In particular, the worship focus group brought together delegates and experts to learn more about local worship practices and discuss the challenges associated with them in individual churches. These are just a few of the many topics that deserve further attention and will be considered in the future work of the member churches and the CPCE.

All these references to worship, whether theoretical, practical or experienced during the meeting, showed the importance of practice in our Protestant tradition, regardless of faith or confession. The services in Sibiu, which gave hope and encouragement in the light of Christ, will always be remembered by the participants.



The square between the Brukenthal School and the cathedral provided space for encounters, especially on the first welcome evening.



The lighting in the cathedral changed from blue to red. The intensive discussions on important church topics were over for the time being. The presentations of various committees were over. The elections, voting procedures and the submission of motions were over. It was time to celebrate a worship service as a communion of believers from all walks of life and home countries.



„In the light of Christ - Called to hope“



The CPCE's aim for this General Assembly was to take a compassionate and loving look at the current worrisome trends, polarizations and challenges, without sweeping anything under the rug. Hope in a Christian sense is active and empowering, allowing us to take actions of love and reconciliation.

The motto of the General Assembly was deliberately chosen to inspire confidence in these challenging times. The associations that hope in the light of Christ awakens were made clear in an art competition in Sibiu (in the run-up to the General Assembly), to which young people were invited to take part: a girl looks expectantly at the door with light glistening through its cracks. Or the image of Jacob, who, on his flight from Esau, sees the ladder to heaven flanked by angels and looks up hopefully. Hope is the hope for positive change. Hope is the hope for accompaniment in difficult times.

The logo of the General Assembly

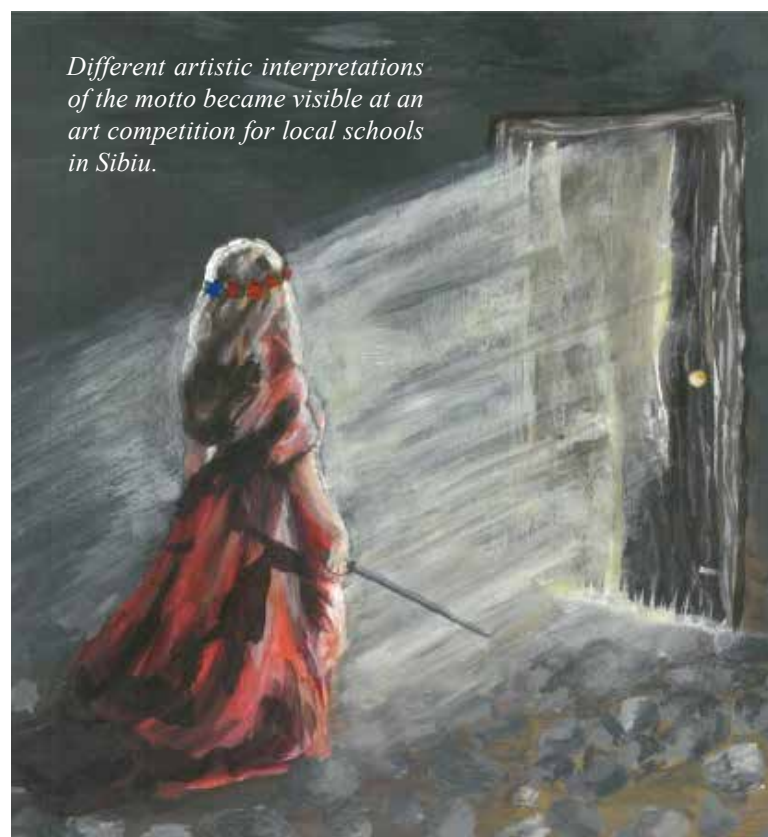
The motto of the General Assembly was visually reflected in the logo: the star of Bethlehem rises over Sibiu – symbolized as a CPCE cross. The star could also be interpreted as one of the shooting stars that usually fall from the sky in August. Such a phenomenon cannot be influenced by humans and perhaps for that very reason evokes a feeling of luck. An observation that is only visible for a few seconds, bringing hope for a moment that a wish may come true.

“Gimme hope, Jo’anna”

The keynote speech by Christine Schliesser, associate professor of systematic theology at the University of Zurich and Director of Studies at the Ecumenical Center for Faith and Society at the University of Fribourg, addressed the topic from a historical and contemporary perspective. The famous anti-apartheid song from the 1980s, “Gimme hope, Jo’anna”, lent the lecture its title. Jo’anna – Johannesburg (a metaphor for the apartheid regime), which was characterized by “blatant injustice, violence and corruption”, is implored to give a sign of hope before dawn breaks. That Christianity has for decades justified this and other unjust regimes theologically – probably with reference to a better afterlife – is one of its darkest chapters, says Christine Schliesser. As a result, all attempts to improve poverty, discrimination, violence or poor working conditions were nipped in the bud and Karl Marx came to his famous, but

rather inglorious analysis of religion as a powerful and numbing opiate of the people.

For Schliesser, however, Christianity is the exact opposite: a hopeful faith that activates people to make the kingdom of God a reality in the world. She agreed with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who in November 1934, in the midst of struggles within the church, wrote about the necessity of faith in the context of hope: “Who would want to talk about a new world and a new humanity without hoping to be part of it? It is not our hope that we will have to be ashamed of in the future, but rather our poor and anxious hopelessness... The more a person dares to hope, the greater they become with their hope: a person grows with their hope – if it is only the hope in God and God’s sole power. The hope remains.”



Different artistic interpretations of the motto became visible at an art competition for local schools in Sibiu.

STATEMENTS

Four statements on democracy, migration, interreligious dialogue and churches as minorities were adopted by the General Assembly.

1. Church and Democracy

The CPCE initiated a working process on the topic of democracy. A statement on the topic of democracy and church was also published during the General Assembly. Being Church in democracy means standing up for human dignity, open discourse and standing against discrimination of minorities.



“Liberal democracy in Europe is in danger”. With these words, OKR Michael Martin (Evang.-Luth. Kirche in Bayern) opened his speech at the CPCE General Assembly, in which he reported on the study process “Church and Democracy”. This work had been commissioned six years earlier by the 2018 General Assembly in Basel, where concerns about “a significant increase in populism, nationalism and xenophobia” were already being expressed.

The topic “Democracy as a challenge for churches and societies” was to be addressed by the regional groups of the CPCE, with only the Southeast Europe Regional Group dealing with the topic consistently over a period of six years. In the material that Martin presented to the General Assembly, the experiences, concerns and convictions of

the churches in Southeast Europe thus formed a focus. These, but also the contributions from other regions of Europe, are less concerned with intra-church democracy, which is taken for granted in the Protestant churches, and more with social experiences in countries that only half a lifetime ago achieved liberal democracy or are now facing new anti-democratic challenges.

European diversity and constant political developments make the topic of “Church and Democracy” a very broad one, and so the General Assembly also gained further perspectives:

1. The General Assembly prepared and adopted a statement that emphasizes three ways in which churches

Excerpts from the statement

The churches' contribution to reconciliation and common understanding in Europe aims to strengthen democratic culture in these challenging situations. Three aspects are important:

1. Churches seek to be constructively critical partners in democratic societies, which have the theological mission to proclaim and bear witness to the Gospel. At the same time, they are critical and self-critical, ready for corrections of course and new beginnings. The church's positive participation in democracy means that it advocates for respect for human dignity, for all opinions to be discussed, and for minorities not to be discriminated against in this process. For the church, this is connected with the idea that the image of God resides in the person who hears the word of God. As a result, Christians are moved to active engagement at the individual level and collectively. When democracy is in existential danger, churches are called to raise their voices in the light of the gospel wherever possible. They can energetically support all those who work to preserve democracy.

2. Churches seek to champion respect for human dignity and seek to strengthen trust in democracy. CPCE churches see themselves as "think tanks" committed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in an inseparable community of worship and Holy Communion. Consequently, the relationship between church and democracy is not a theological question of faith, but rather reflects a theological movement directed towards society.

3. Churches seek to be spaces that show how diversity and community can be lived out simultaneously. Churches should enable democratic forms of participation. In this way, churches can credibly bear witness to the outside world about what they themselves live in their interaction. Democratic processes are endangered when people lose their trust in democracy and even actively disrupt it. The result is that people withdraw from their commitment to the community and no longer treat each other with respect.



can strengthen democracy (see above). The title is "Strengthening Democratic Culture for Unity to Flourish in Diversity".

2. The CPCE has published a book, replete with rich illustrations, on the architecture of Protestant synod buildings, entitled "Spaces of Decision-Making = The Architecture of Protestant Synod Halls".

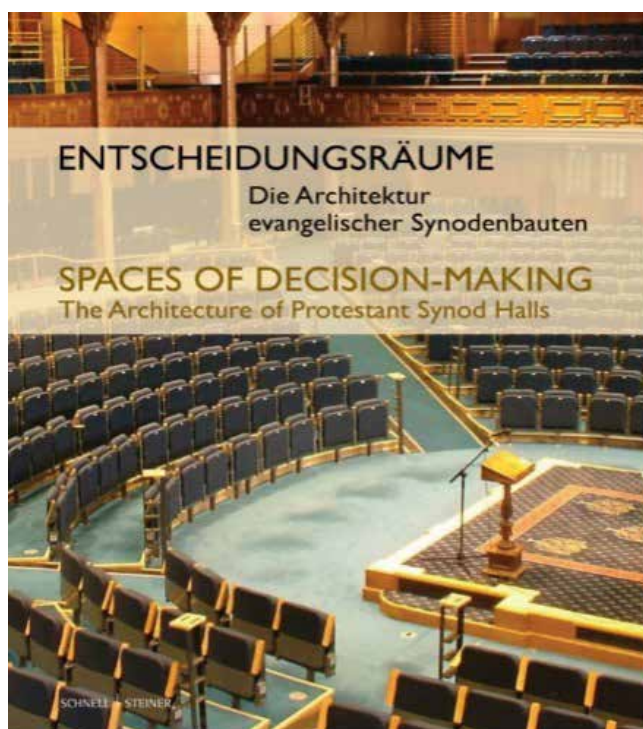
3. The General Assembly welcomes further discussions in the CPCE member churches, for which a study guide will be prepared in the coming months.

4. The delegates had already received a set of flashcards from the Southet Europe regional group in Sibiu, with

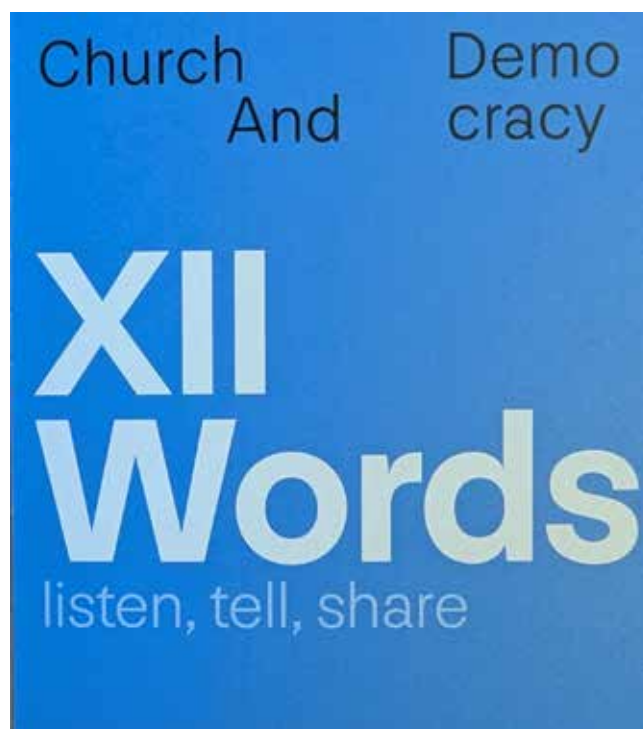
twelve keywords on the subject of democracy. These are intended to stimulate discussion.

"Democracy is not a 100m sprint. Democracy is a long-distance race," Michael Martin stated in his introductory speech and, in keeping with the athletic imagery, named the three disciplines of the democracy triathlon: strengthening civil society, promoting participation and fostering openness to diversity.

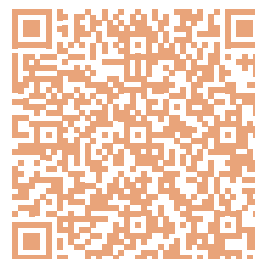
CPCE articles/publications on the topic



In this book, five synod buildings are presented. The architecture of each of these buildings shows a Protestant understanding of synodality, in which equal coexistence is both the desired and often-lived reality. The buildings were largely built in the 19th century, when the blooming of democratic processes were a sign of the times.



The 12 flashcards, which provide thought-provoking impulses and a basis for discussion on 12 key concepts of democracy (freedom, diversity, participation, minorities, etc.), can be ordered from the CPCE, along with the book on the synod buildings .





Labor migration tears families apart and brings them together seasonally. Churches should respond to this with dual membership options. Adobe Stock.

2. Migration from the perspective of the countries of origin

“The size of a church is not determined by its membership, but by its tasks.” With these words, the churches in Central and Eastern Europe describe their approach to the issue of migration from their perspective. Despite the dramatic decline in some communities, there is still hope and new players in the churches. Migration is “a form of human and social life” that has always existed. It has a major impact on family life, which is why it is important to support these families in the new destination countries as well.

Excerpt from the statement

Emigration and the disruption it causes leaves its mark on local communities, especially on church congregations. Service providers are lost, gaps open up in the local social fabric, structures grow old and continuity is lost. The consequences of migration are further exacerbated by rural flight, in which young families – with and without children – move to cities. One bishop from Eastern Europe says: “The people who go to the West are missing here. For us, it is a painful loss.” For many people, especially those from minority churches in Central and Eastern Europe,

the home church in their country of origin played a crucial role in their lives. It meant community, a neighborhood structure, a sense of identity, and a mother tongue, homeland and firm religious traditions belonging to them. Emigration threatens the loss of all of these.

The problem affects entire states, since the health and pension systems of Eastern and Central European countries have significantly fewer contributors because working adults pay their taxes and duties in other countries. Since it is often the case that more and more well-educated people are moving abroad, there is also a shortage of skilled workers. The churches in Central and Eastern Europe say

with the motto of the 9th General Assembly of the CPCE: “We are called to hope. The size of a church is not determined by its number of members, but by its tasks.” This is how new impulses have emerged. Some churches have become open to bilingualism or multilingualism. Where gaps have been torn, new energies have often emerged in communities. People who were not previously in view have taken on responsibility and have done so in a remarkable fashion.

What can be done?

The basic prerequisite must be that the people who move away must not become scapegoats in their country of origin, and in the destination country they must not become second-class citizens! Migration is an existing way of life and the inner conflict and grief of the people must be respected. Despite all the pain that has been and is being caused, we encourage people in the countries of origin to accept life choices made by others and to accompany people in the destination countries in their new phase of life.

CPCE publication on the topic

In its study document “Theology of Diaspora”, the CPCE has taken stock of the Protestant minority churches. The diaspora concept understands the meaning of diaspora in the formation of a wealth of relationships in the sense of following Christ.



CPCE initiatives:

It is important to support families torn apart by migration and to be there for the people in the new destination countries. The churches are asked to consider the question of dual memberships.

With the “Euro-Orphans” project, the CPCE has supported a project for children whose parents work abroad. The General Assembly wishes to continue and intensify this cooperation with the Gustav-Adolf Werk. More information can be found at Church aid projects (www.leuenberg.eu/eurowaisen-euro-orphans/).



3. Interreligious relations in the context of the war in the Middle East

Many CPCE member churches are involved in local and regional interreligious dialogue. However, this dialogue is severely threatened by the violent conflicts in the Middle East. The CPCE calls on the member churches to remain in dialogue with people of other religions. In this way ignorance, fear and prejudice can be overcome and a common search for freedom, justice and peace in the world can be pursued.

Excerpt from the statement

Remain ready for dialogue with people of other religions and seek new avenues of coming together.

Listen first and foremost to each other's personal stories, in how they shape our thinking, in order to better understand the respective arguments. In the case of the Middle East conflict, instantaneous discussion of facts can easily lead to dead ends.

Tell each other about how the Middle East conflict is situated in your personal biography.

Speak about your own consternation in the face of the escalation of violence in the Middle East and how it has changed you.

Express empathy with those who suffer in these conflicts.

Stand with those affected by terror, violence and oppression, irrespective of which nation, language or religion they belong to.

Do your best to contribute to humanitarian aid for those suffering as a result of the conflicts in the Middle East.

Through your contacts with the Protestant churches in the region, especially via FMEEC, offer your support to Christians in the Middle East who are themselves suffering from the conflicts, while also acting as mediators.

Keep in mind that there is no alternative to dialogue.

CPCE publication on this topic:

The study on "Protestant Perspectives on Religious Plurality in Europe" suggests a way in which the CPCE member churches can conduct theological discussion on the plurality of religions. The self-understanding of Protestant theology stands at the forefront of this work. The work gives insights into the gospel, which must also be emphasized in interreligious discussion.



This book can be ordered from the CPCE! (Price: 15 euros)



4. Statement on the existence of church and linguistic minorities

Regionally, many Protestant churches are minority churches with long traditions of reflecting on and shaping their coexistence with the respective majority churches. In the present day, however, a variety of processes are also turning traditional majority churches into minority churches across Europe. This change requires social and theological reflection. The General Assembly has adopted a statement on these trends.

Excerpt from the statement

The General Assembly recommends that its member churches:

- openly reflect on their own minority situation and experiences;
- ask themselves how they treat their own minority groups within the church and where there are obstacles to acceptance in accordance with the Gospel;
- reflect on their own history if they were involved in the oppression of minorities, and where necessary to initiate a reappraisal of this history;
- stand up for the rights of minorities in society, and where necessary, to advocate internationally through the CPCE for the recognition of ecclesiastical, linguistic and national minorities in their own contexts;
- try to build bridges between majority and minority in terms of religious and denominational, linguistic and cultural, ethnic and national identities in their own contexts.

CPCE publication on this topic



This study clarifies the difficult relationship between church, people, state and nation, and shows that precisely in times of growing nationalism, Protestantism, due to its diversity and its rooting in national and territorial identities, has a special role to play in the unification of Europe.

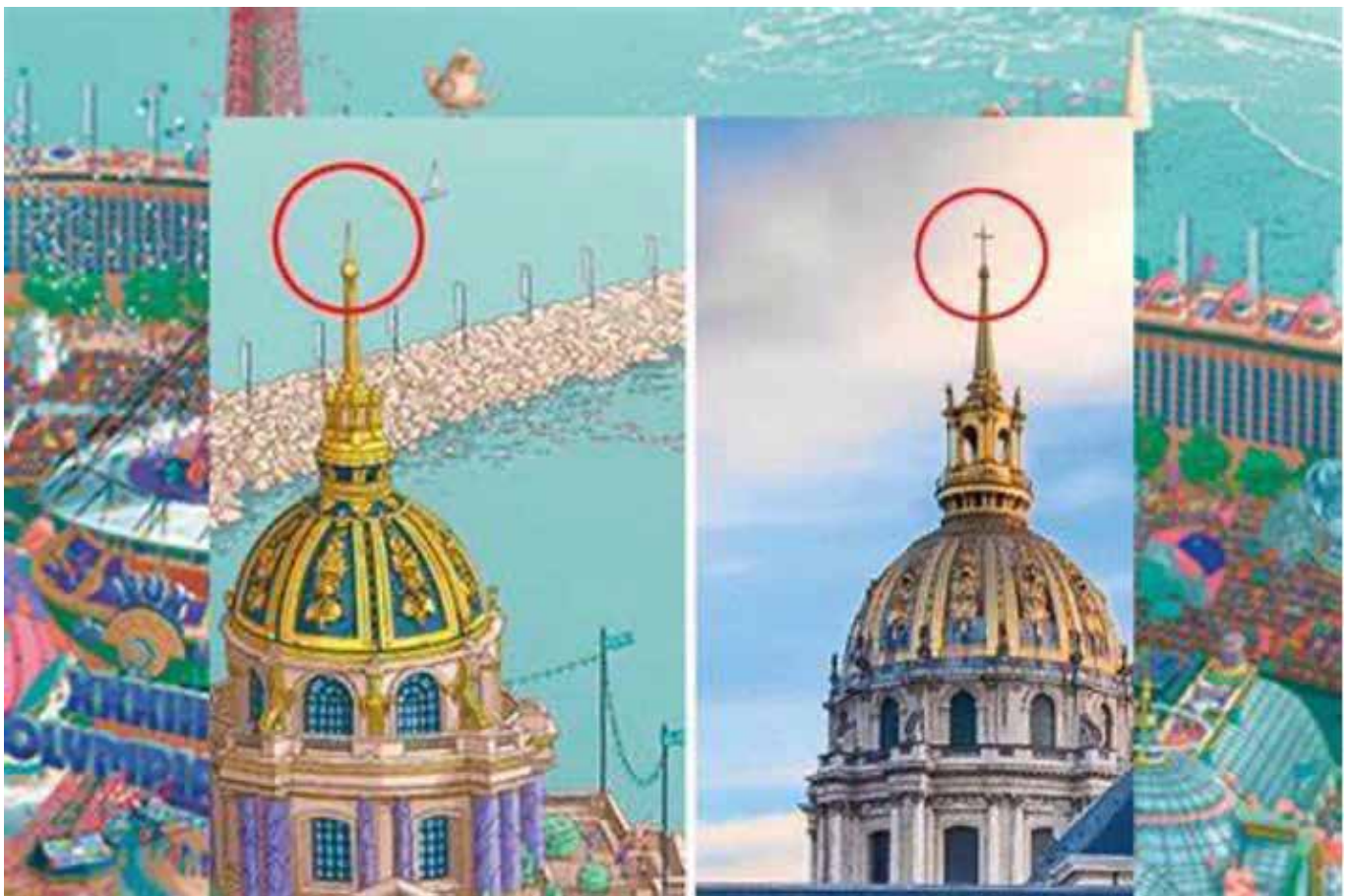
This book can be ordered from the CPCE!





Christian speaking of God

In its study paper, the CPCE provides the member churches with an orientation aid for the way of talking about God and emphasizes that an appropriate understanding of God's speech can only be expected from his self-revelation in Jesus Christ. By Elio Jaillet



The omission of the cross on Les Invalides on the banners of the Olympic Games did not go unnoticed. It would be a point of commentary in the media, sometimes negatively. Olympics.com/ <https://twitter.com/Sachinettiyl> Montage: JF

“Dieu unit ceux qui s’aiment” (God unites those who love one another). This is the last sentence of Céline Dion’s ‘Hymne à l’amour’ (My Love for You), and it was the last sentence of the opening ceremony of the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris. Singing about God on the big stage in secular France did not cause any scenes. However, the reaction to the unambiguously ambiguous banquet setup, reminiscent of the Last Supper, was reported across all media. One could say that “God” has invited Himself into the public square and provided material for discussion,

whether or not this was intended. The divine presence also comes to light in other current contexts, where it is used in contemporary war rhetoric or is invoked in social conflicts.

Figure 11: The fact that the cross on the Invalides had disappeared on the poster for the Olympic Games did not go unnoticed and was commented on in the media, including negatively.

Public relevance of a “speech about God”

In this context, the Protestant churches are challenged to reflect on their participation in these different discourses and to dare to speak about God in their own way. In the face of these challenges, the text “Christian Speaking of God” offers a field from which one can learn to listen: on the one hand to the social and cultural environment, and on the other hand to God, who speaks in Jesus Christ and his gospel. From this listening, we can dare to speak of God and his great deeds with confidence and courage (Psalm 105:1).

Carefully differentiating and describing the contexts and ways in which our speech about God can take shape is also an important benefit of this study and a contribution to a more sustainable way of living out our disagreements – especially when it comes to the most important things.

Revelation received again and again

Reflecting on and developing a Christian speaking about God is a never-ending task that fundamentally depends on what God reveals about Himself today. This statement does not mean that God is present only in Jesus Christ. He is present wherever the Spirit creates and sustains the life that God gives. But Jesus Christ (his person, his story) serves as a point of reference for interpreting and recognizing the truth of God in the multitude of past, present and future experiences of God and the accompanying stories and thoughts.

Significance of the text: no magisterial authority, but suggestions

I believe that this text is important in many ways. I would like to mention just two reasons here:

I. When we as Protestants are asked about our perceived image of God, we are often tempted to relativize what we say about God. This CPCE text fundamentally changes the situation: it offers a common space for discourse that can be drawn upon in interreligious dialogue or offered to dialogue partners as a possible starting point for a conversation about God. In dialogue situations (interreligious, ecumenical) and in public appearances, this text makes it possible to present a Protestant position on the subject of “God”.

II. This text also invites a personal articulation of the speech of God in the context of the Protestant churches. It has no doctrinal authority: the central role and importance of a personally reflected manifestation of faith, based on the interpretation of Scripture, remains central. This text can, however, invite one to deepen one or another point of one’s personal understanding of God, whether it be because one discovers something different than previously thought or because one does not agree with what is stated.

Conclusion

From the work on this text and the discussions during the General Assembly, a number of points for further work have emerged: The question of the epistemological status of the speech of God and its meaning for the church remains open. Questions about the understanding of the sinfulness of man or the position of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity in relation to the Father and the Son (important for the dialogue with the Orthodox churches) were also emphasized, along with desires for further development of a public theology. Further work can be carried out on the basis of a text that has been recognized by the General Assembly as important.

Public/political sphere

Testifying, but without violence and claim to power

Public confession and freedom to criticize religion

Theology as a space for social learning

Critical position on polarization and totalization

Culture

Dialogue between the churches and secular cultural creations

Artwork as a space to encounter the language of God

Critical dialogue with the (distorted) images of the Christian faith in culture



Speaking of God



Private/professional sphere

Communicating faith in the diverse reality of the family

Friendship as a symbolic realization of God's love

A life that bears witness to faith without being off-putting

Ecumenical and interreligious dialogue

Ecumenical unity in the testimony of the Triune God

Intercultural openness for the shaping of Christian speech about God

A hospitable dialogue that strengthens and honors differences

Recognition of the ambivalence of every speech about God

Practice and theology of the Lord's Supper

With the mutual recognition of Holy Communion in the Reformed, Lutheran and United churches, the Leuenberg Agreement of 1973 marked a new beginning as a communion of churches. In the past six years, the member churches of the CPCE have been looking at how the issue of dealing with the unbaptized or baptized persons who no longer have any connection to the church is and can be addressed in practice at Holy Communion. By Stefan Cosoroaba.



There are different approaches within the church communion on the question of whether unbaptized people are introduced to baptism through participation in Holy Communion, or whether only baptized people are invited.

Two specific questions should be considered:

1. "What does it mean to be an inviting/welcoming church in a multicultural context?"
2. "Who is invited to the Lord's Supper: the baptized, the 'instructed', the confirmed, the church members, or all?"

It is noteworthy that the word 'practice' comes before 'theology'. The usual approach to an ecclesiastical topic usually begins with theology (biblical and dogmatic analysis) followed by practice, practice which more or less adheres to the guidelines of theology. The approach of the CPCE working group was exactly the opposite. The approach comes from North American theological thinking, in Europe it was considered by Regin Prenter. In the German-speaking sphere, Jochen Arnold further

developed “liturgical theology”. He also led the CPCE working group on the subject of Holy Communion.

In this conceptual ordering, liturgy is not only the consequence of theological thinking, but is considered “Theologia prima” and precedes any dogmatics (“Theologia secunda”). In other words, liturgical practice is not a softening of dogmatic principles. Prayer and praise were and are the source of theological reflection. Four principles should accompany this path from practice to theology in order to weigh the results:

1. New Testament witness in the narrower sense,
2. Biblical witness in the broader sense,
3. Tradition and confession,
4. and experience.

The process began with a survey by the Institute for Social Research of the Evangelical Church in Germany on the practice of Holy Communion in the CPCE churches. The results of the survey included 70 responses but were not as productive as hoped. They still grant valuable insights into the great and colorful variety of ordinances and practices in Protestant Europe.

Can unbaptized people participate in the Lord’s Supper?

Church can be “welcoming” or “inviting” in English. Both are translated identically in German as “einladend”. While one means passive hospitality, the other means active outreach to call to oneself. The difference has clear ecclesiological consequences. This also led to the question of the so-called “open table” in the working group, i.e. how churches deal with unbaptized people being admitted to Holy Communion. This is a controversial topic of discussion within the CPCE. Churches that have decided to grant the wish to participate at the “Lord’s Table” before baptism do so in biblical and theological responsibility. “Practice and Theology of the Lord’s Supper” finds a common denominator for these different approaches by clearly identifying the Lord’s Supper as “the fundamental community of the baptized”. This marks out a Protestant corridor in which everyone can find themselves. This is because all CPCE churches only see and celebrate Holy Communion in the context of baptism. Some see baptism as a compulsory entry sacrament, while others see the possibility that Holy Communion is also an entry sacrament, which then leads to baptism. However, the connection is dogmatically presupposed by all.

How do you bring the baptized back to the Lord’s Table?

The major challenge remains as to how the many baptized who have not taken part in Holy Communion for years can be won back for sacramental fellowship. There are obstacles, such as the liturgical language, which requires guests to have a sound biblical and liturgical knowledge. How welcoming can Holy Communion celebrations be for occasional visitors who are no longer familiar with the procedures?

The Protestant tradition of the Eucharist should be embedded in an attractive service design

There are calls for openness in dealing with forms, but only to the point where the Eucharist remains recognizable in the Protestant tradition. Words of institution and thanksgiving, the Lord’s Prayer and epiclesis must not be missing in any of the variants. But there are also practical questions: How do rooms have to be designed to be “inviting”? How does the Lord’s Supper community change when children are included? What music is appropriate for the occasion? Finally, the document concludes with exemplary liturgical building blocks that are intended to inspire.

The General Assembly has approved “Practice and Theology of the Lord’s Supper”. It sees the document as a preliminary result of the work and a helpful contribution to the understanding of the Eucharist within the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe. It recommends further development of these ideas, particularly with regard to inclusion, interculturality, language and accessibility. In 2025, the CPCE will publish this document in book form, supplemented by preparatory and follow-up work. This will make it possible to implement the wish of the General Assembly, which welcomes a discussion of the document in the member churches.

Gender, sexuality, marriage and family

The 400-page document, which was the result of a study process over the last few years led to discord within the CPCE member churches. The Hungarian Reformed Church withdrew as the host church in advance of the General Assembly due to their disagreement with the contents of paper. The study document brings together various theological perspectives and the latest findings from biology and the social sciences on issues of homosexuality, gender binarity and gender transition, with a chapter also dedicated to the dark sides of sexuality – abuse and sexualized violence. The General Assembly has been working intensively with this study document issued by the Council. By Ulla Schmidt, head of the study group.

Gender, sexuality and different forms of family structure are universal human conditions. Many experience their self-image and relationships as uncomplicated, while others struggle with them. They may struggle all their lives to find their way in the world and in their bodies, as well as to have successful relationships. These different experiences and challenges force churches and congregations to respond to social developments and to address the question of how to bear witness to God's love in today's world.

With this reality in mind, the 2018 CPCE General Assembly in Basel decided to commission a study on the topics of gender, sexuality, marriage and family. The main task was to bring the most important theories from the natural, social and cultural sciences into a theological context. The aim was not to provide definitive answers to complex and

sometimes conflicting questions, but to provide material for the churches' own reflections and dialogues.

In the Christian faith, the interpretation of Holy Scripture is of the utmost importance. Other sources of the Protestant ethic stemming from tradition, reason and experience, as well as the most important Protestant ethical ideals of freedom, responsibility, love and justice, are among the relevant basic principles.

The reflection on gender and sexuality, including the aspects of these topics which lend themselves to conflict, has revealed a variety of positions and answers that are in line with the basic principles of the Christian faith.



How to deal with the diversity of gender identities, partnership models and family constellations? A challenging question that has been explored over the past six years in a study document that has now been published . Adobe Stock.

Gender polarity not in all physiological characteristics

Considerations of gender are just one area that the document touches on. In sexual reproduction, there are female and male sex cells – therefore, it is clearly binary. Genders can be assigned by means of chromosomes, hormones and genitalia, but without always containing a binary character. Therefore, gender attributions are fluid.

The question is how these insights can be incorporated theologically into the consideration of human beings as created in God's image. As humans, we are created in a body and are partly shaped by socio-cultural factors. Our physical nature does not consistently reveal characteristics of a gender; rather, there are binary and non-binary physical characteristics. Thus, it can be argued that human gender is "contingently binary". Another interpretation is that while reproduction requires male and female germ cells, the concrete human life is not necessarily connected to reproduction and should therefore not be considered a necessary dimension of gender. From this perspective, gender is non-binary.

A much-debated question is whether humans were created in the image of God as man and woman, as described in the Bible. This gender binary can lead to people with non-binary identities being excluded from the status of being created in God's image. This raises questions about the universality of the image of God for all of humanity, as well as questions about how the ethical ideals of freedom, responsibility, love and justice can be realized.

Sexual abuse in the spotlight

The study process also addressed the churches' handling of sexual abuse. It explains the importance of appropriate safeguards.

It is well known that some of the specific issues addressed in the study document have been and continue to be the subject of profound disagreement between and within the CPCE member churches. While the text does not claim to resolve or smooth over these differences, it does identify the fundamental mutual commitments and obligations under the Leuenberg Agreement, with guidelines for an "ethics of disagreement" among church representatives.





How churches can act in situations of conflict was the subject of a podium discussion between Christine Schliesser, who is involved in the peace process in Rwanda, Anton Tikhomirov (deputy archbishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Russia and Other States), Olexandr Gross (German Evangelical Lutheran Church in Ukraine), Pastor Samir Vrabec, who experienced war in Yugoslavia as a youngster, and Pastor David Bruce, who also suffered very personal losses in the Northern Ireland conflict.

Panel discussion on the war in Ukraine

Love your enemies...? In a panel discussion on the topic “Time of Hope - Churches as Actors in Overcoming War and Conflict”, church representatives from Ukraine and Russia sat at the same table and provided insights into the current work of the church in places ravaged by war. By Klaus Rieth and Magdalena Bruckmüller.

On the topic “Time of Hope - Churches as Actors in Overcoming War and Conflict”, the CPCE brought together representatives from Northern Ireland, Croatia, Ukraine and Russia for a panel discussion at the General Assembly. Olexandr Gross from the German Evangelical Church in Ukraine (DELKU) recalled that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, 14 of its constituent republics were content with their fate, but one of them was not. Putin then launched an attempt to rebuild the old empire. “We have learned to live with war,” said the DELKU synod president, and continued: “We in Ukraine know that any day could be our last.” As a sign of hope, his church has built three new playgrounds in recent years, distributed food, helped

with medical care for the army and held church services twice a week to give people space for hope and prayer.

At the moment, electricity is only available for three hours a day in most areas. Due to these extreme conditions, many people continue to flee Ukraine in search of a better life.

The rector of the theological seminary of the Lutheran Church of Russia, Anton Tikhomirov from St. Petersburg, who is also the deputy archbishop of the Lutheran Church of Russia, pointed out that many people in Russia are also affected by the war. Refugees and casualties exist on the Russian side. His church would gladly continue to pray for peace and maintain relations with their Ukrainian sisters



and brothers. “But we have also learned,” adds Tikhomirov, “to remain silent and not to touch the wounds.”

Slow relationship-building is crucial

Rev. Dr. David Bruce, former moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, also spoke of wounds that, unlike bruises, cannot always heal. As a young man, he lost a good friend in an IRA attack. “Murders were the order of the day, but when my friend was murdered, it plunged me into a severe crisis. I have thought about it every day for the last 45 years, and the loss has shaped me and my work in the church.” Nevertheless, he believes that Jesus’ call to love one’s enemies is a path to reconciliation. ‘In Northern Ireland, this means building trust where it has been lost. Being in the same room. Perhaps then we will sit together at the same table and a relationship will begin’.

The importance of building relationships over the long term was also addressed by Christine

Schliesser, Director of Studies at the Ecumenical Center for Faith and Society at the University of Fribourg and lecturer of systematic theology and ethics at the University of Zurich, which is involved in the reconciliation process in the Rwanda conflict. With the project

“Cows for Peace”, in which perpetrators and victims take care of a cow together, estranged people and groups can

slowly build a relationship. According to Schliesser, the church plays an important role in the reconciliation process in Rwanda, as 90% of Rwandans are Christian.

Samir Vrabec, pastor of the Protestant Church in Osijek, who experienced the war in

Croatia as a teenager, was also a guest on the podium. He had mixed feelings when

asked to participate in the panel discussion. “I’m not yet ready to bear such profound witness to the war period. But I can talk about how I experienced the war.” What gave Samir Vrabec strength was experiencing the community of the church, in which the Reformed pastor also looked after the orphaned Lutheran community. But the ecumenical spirit extended even further: “The strongest sign was when our Reformed pastor held funerals for Orthodox believers.”

Participants agreed that the most important element of reconciliation processes is the long-term building of relationships.



IA total of 27 stewards were actively involved in running the Assembly. Young people were also active as delegates and put forward their points of view.

Young people as actors in the General Assembly

**The issues close to the hearts of the young generation were discussed in a separate focus group.
By Daniel Mohr.**

We have all been young at some point or still are young. Some feel young regardless of how they look. Being young is a blessing and has a positive effect on those around you. At the CPCE General Assembly, youthful faces and voices were also strongly represented – as CPCE stewards, young delegates and experts. Their contribution helped shape the work of the CPCE for the next six years.

The participation of young people also plays an important role in the individual member churches. A focus group on this topic was moderated and led by members of the CPCE's "Young Theologians in Communion" program. Delegates from various member churches came together to discuss the participation of young people.

Being young – a question of age?

One important topic that arose in the focus group was the question of who is actually considered young. In some contexts, the maximum age is 30, while others say that someone who has just found Christ is young in their faith. It became clear that both groups must be taken seriously and that the concept of youth cannot be limited to traditional views.



Social media as the church's youth voice

The churches and older delegates also had requests for the younger generation. They called on the younger generation, both at the Assembly and beyond, to inherit the voice of the church in social media. They have access to groups that older generations find difficult to reach and build bridges between the church and these new target groups.

Issues that matter to young people – decarbonization, digitalization, and dialogue with new church communities

The Young Theologians in Communion also drafted a statement to be presented to the Assembly. It highlighted issues that matter to young people in the church today and called on the churches and the CPCE to make these issues significant areas of work in the coming years. These included taking proactive steps in the fight against climate change, reflecting on the Protestant corridor in

ethical issues, digitalization, dialogues with “new church communities” and the processes of reconciliation. Many of these topics will be addressed in the CPCE working processes in the coming years.

General Assembly as an opportunity for exchange

The young people agreed with the other participants of the General Assembly that the Assembly is an opportunity for Protestant networking on a European level. The prospect of celebrating worship and Holy Communion together was particularly well received. It is to be hoped that many young people who were present in Sibiu will participate in CPCE initiatives in the coming years and decades.

New Council and Presidium

A new Presidium and a new Council were elected at the General Assembly and will soon take up the mandated work. Which of the 18 proposed topics will be dealt with in concrete terms will be decided at the Council meeting in Vienna in February 2025. The makeup of the new Council takes into account the different regions of the CPCE and ensures a proper balance between women and men. Likewise, the four different confessional families (Reformed, Lutheran, Methodist and United) are accounted for. The three-member Presidium now consists of two Reformed representatives and one Lutheran representative.



The Council (from the bottom left) Georg Plasger, Rita Famos and Marko Tiitus were elected to the Presidium. (2nd row, from left): Thomas Pietro Peral, Eva Guldánová, Tamás Kodácsy and Ulrike Scherf. (3rd row, from left): Ulrich Rüsen-Weinhold, Laura Kjærgaard Fischer, Dr. Jørgen Thaarup as a substitute for Annette Gruschwitz, Dimitris Boukis and Ingrid Bachler. Elected to Council, not pictured: Nathan Eddy

**The new Council members and their proxies come from 15 different European countries.
The following individuals will lead the CPCE as Council members for the next six years:**

Council members

Rev. Ingrid Bachler (Evangelical Church A.C. in Austria)

Rev. Dr. Nathan Eddy (United Reformed Church)

Rev. Rita Famos, President of the Evangelical Reformed Church in Switzerland, who will serve as the CPCE's Executive President

Rev. Laura Kjærgaard Fischer (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark)

Rev. Dimitris Boukis (Evangelical Church in Greece)

Rev. Dr. Annette Gruschwitz (United Methodist Church in Germany)

Rev. Eva Guldánová (Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Slovakia)

Rev. Dr. Tamás Kodácsy (Reformed Church in Hungary)

Dr. Georg Plasger, member of the Evangelical Reformed Church in Germany and the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland, Professor of Systematic and Ecumenical Theology in Siegen.

Rev. Thomas Prieto Peral (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria)

Rev. Dr. Ulrich Rüsen-Weinhold (United Protestant Church of France – EPUdF)

Rev. Ulrike Scherf (Evangelical Church in Hesse and Nassau)

Rev. Marko Tiitus, Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church (EELC), Bishop of the Diocese of South Estonia

Presidium

Rev. Rita Famos, Executive President

Rev. Marko Tiitus

Dr. Georg Plasger

Stellvertretende Ratsmitglieder

Rev. Markus Schaefer (Evangelical Church of the Rhineland)

Rev. Marco Batenburg (Protestant Church in the Netherlands)

Rev. Dr. Martin Hirzel (Evangelical Reformed Church of Switzerland)

Rev. Marcin Brzóska (Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Poland)

Rev. Dr. Pawel Andrzej Gajewski (Waldensian Church)

Rev. Dr. Jorgen Thaarup (United Methodist Church, Northern Europe)

Rev. Jana Hofmanová (Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren)

Dr. Klára Tarr Czelovszky (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hungary),

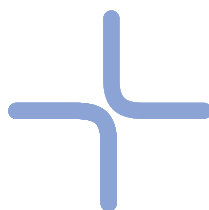
Rev. Dr. Susanne Bei der Wieden (Evangelical Reformed Church in Germany)

Rev. Raphael Quandt (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bavaria,

Rev. Petra Renate Magne de la Croix (United Protestant Church of Alsace and Lorraine – UEPAL)

Rev. Dr. Susanne Schenk (Evangelical Lutheran Church in Württemberg)

Rev. Gerhard Servatius-Depner (Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Romania)



Gemeinschaft Evangelischer Kirchen in Europa (GEKE)
Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE)
Communión d'Eglises Protestantes en Europe (CEPE)