

The Community of Protestant Churches in Europe

On the flight from Belfast to Vienna for the Fourth Assembly of the Leuenberg Fellowship of Churches, one question kept surfacing. It was: what was the possible relevance of such an Assembly for the churches in Ireland? After all, the Assembly was being held in Vienna, in the heart of Europe; its language would be mainly German and the main issues dealt with those of Continental Europe. Moreover, it represented, as Professor Grosser, the great French Humanist said in his keynote address on the first working day, an historical 'truce' to stop the name calling which had gone on for centuries between churches which had come from the Reformation. That name-calling, however, was hardly a major issue in Ireland where it has been carried out across a rather different divide.

As the Assembly progressed, however, answers began to emerge. For a start, while German was the dominant language and while at times when issues were being hotly debated, especially in the smaller groups, those whose mother tongue was not German were at a decided disadvantage (as happens to those whose mother tongue is not English at many other major conferences and Assemblies) an excellent interpretation service meant that all could take part. More importantly, however, the large numbers of delegates from minority churches in the former Eastern Europe and South America; the invitation to the European Methodist Churches to begin the process of joining the Fellowship and the decision to begin conversations with the Anglican Communion brought the work of the Fellowship much closer to home for those living both in Ireland and the Great Britain.

The background to the Leuenberg Agreement was the scandal of the division within churches coming out of the Reformation, where even in small villages there was no table or pulpit fellowship between Lutheran and Reformed churches. Many developments had prepared for the signing of the Agreement in 1973.

Inside Germany

1. From the 19th century the phenomenon of United Churches (Unierte Kirchen) in Germany, where in particular Lutheran and Reformed Churches came together, for example in Hamburg kept the issue of church unity to the fore in Protestant German theological thinking. .
2. This was further encouraged by the famous Barmen theological declaration in 1934 which had involved the coming together of Lutheran, Reformed and United Churches in a common witness in the church/Nazi struggle of that time.
3. In 1947 there was a church gathering in Treysa (Germany) which called for a 'binding theological conference on the doctrine of holy communion' which would allow churches to enter into table fellowship. Six rounds of talks took place between 1947 and 1957 and the Arnoldshain Theses on Holy Communion were adopted. While this was a theological breakthrough, it apparently had little practical effect on life on the ground.
4. Between 1968 and 1970 further talks were held within Germany between Lutherans and Reformed churches which established the 'Theses on Church Fellowship' of May 1970. As a result, the churches were ready for the next step ... the drawing up and signing of the Leuenberg Agreement.

Outside Germany

Conversations between the Lutheran World Federation and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches had been going on from 1955, culminating in the third round in 1969 in Leuenberg,

which showed that it ought to be possible to work out an agreement which would later be acceptable to the churches and on which table and pulpit fellowship could be based in all of Europe. For an excellent account of these talks cf Lukas Fischer's article entitled 'A History of the Leuenberg Agreement' in 1998, the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Agreement. It can be found at <http://warc.ch/dt/erl3/11.html>

The actual agreement was made in 1973 and by April 1976 69 out of the 88 churches involved had already signed it and sent their agreement to the commission on Faith and Order. Since then over 100 churches have signed it. The precise figure varies as some member churches unite and others join. The churches are also limited to Europe, with 4 Latin American Lutheran churches which have strong links with Europe. The European Methodist Church joined in 1006.

The position of the Nordic Lutheran churches is rather unique; only the Norwegian church has signed it (in 1999); the rest have not signed it, but participate in every way in the agreement. There are two reasons for this; firstly their state constitution (particularly in Denmark) makes it difficult to enter into fellowship with non-Lutheran churches; secondly, theologically, their doctrine of fellowship must involve a process of growing together into full structural church fellowship, and as we shall see, this is a long term goal of the churches of the Leuenberg Fellowship, not a prerequisite for joining it.

The basic model for the agreement is unity in **reconciled diversity**. The churches declare church fellowship 'in loyalty to the confessions of faith which bind them or with due respect for their traditions.' 'Through this we can recognize each other as churches if in our fundamental confessions we agree on the one truth of the Gospel yet express it in a diversity of forms.' Hence the main thrust of the agreement is on the teaching on the Gospel. The first main section of the Agreement (after the historical preamble) is entitled 'The Common Understanding of the Gospel' which is subdivided into Justification; Preaching, baptism and the Lord's Supper. It then goes on to deal with the mutual doctrinal condemnations within the reformed family in the time of the Reformation era and concludes

Wherever these statements are accepted, [i.e. Doctrinal statements about the Gospel etc.] the condemnations of the Reformation confessions in respect of the Lord's Supper, Christology, and predestination do not affect the doctrinal position. This does not mean that the condemnations pronounced by the Reformation fathers are irrelevant; but they are no longer an obstacle to church fellowship.

28 There remain considerable differences between our churches in forms of worship, types of spirituality, and church order. These differences are often more deeply felt in the congregations than the traditional doctrinal differences. Nevertheless, in fidelity to the New Testament and Reformation criteria for church fellowship, we cannot discern in these differences any factors which should divide the Church.

Developments since 1973

Clearly such a process and final statement is open to the criticism that it is merely ratifying the *status quo*. If this criticism is to be met, then the Leuenberg Agreement must be seen as the start of a process. This process was seen to be two-pronged: doctrinal and practical, and was guided by a series of Assemblies (Sigtuna [Sweden] 1973; Driebergen 1981; Strasburg 1987, Vienna 1994, Belfast in 2000 and Budapest in 2006 and between the Assemblies by an

executive committee (now called a council). They monitor progress on the ground, set up regional groupings and also design and set up continuing theological conversations.

Church fellowship:

If Leuenberg did not result in increasing church fellowship on the ground it would be a failure. It has been successful in many areas of Germany where it is particularly relevant. There have been more difficulties and, perhaps, less success in other European countries. In Ireland and the British Isles it has never been perceived as the chief ecumenical instrument in promoting unity or co-operation between Presbyterians, Methodists and Episcopalians and Lutherans.

Doctrinal Studies

On the doctrinal side much energy has been expended on writing doctrinal papers on various topics.... The Two Kingdoms; The Lordship of Christ; Baptism; Freedom and Responsibility; the Church, the relationship between the church and Judaism are just some of the important publications of the CPCE as it is now called. The documents are, in my opinion, excellent and a first class resource for all the churches. There are several problems associated with them, however.

1. Distribution, especially in Great Britain and Ireland has been very poor.
2. Because the documents are highly technical and theologically accurate, they are hardly bedtime reading for the average church member (even when they are translated properly which has not always been the case). Successive executive meetings have tried to get round this by suggesting publishing a 'popular' version ... but quickly realized that such popular versions which would miss the nuances which had been so carefully written into the text could be problematic.
3. While many (and I would count myself among those) see great value in formulating a or the Protestant contribution to, say, the theology of the Church, others see it as a diversion from what they see as the only show in town, bilateral discussions between the individual churches and the Roman Catholic Church. .

Conclusion

The Community of Protestant Churches in Europe is part of a continuing process. Work continues in the area of doctrine, in representing the Protestant churches in Europe, in continuing conversations with the Porvoo churches and with the European Baptist Federation It is one contribution towards breaking down misunderstandings among churches among many others. It is very conscious that it is part of a much wider picture and recognizes that it must be very careful not to hinder other dialogues which are taking place between churches of the L.A. and churches outside it. Its members feel, however, that its basic model of 'unity in reconciled diversity' is a useful one which can contribute to the church's attempts to break down the walls of partition between us and reverse the trend to mutual hostility and growing apart which has been characteristic of much of the church's development in the past.

For more information on the CPCE c.f. its website www.leuenberg.net

J. C. McCullough.