



EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH OF FINLAND<sup>†</sup>

**BISHOPS' CONFERENCE**

Bishops' Conference 5<sup>th</sup> April 2017

## **Statement on the Community of the Protestant Churches in Europe Council document**

### ***Church Communion***

As a CPCE participating church, we are grateful for the opportunity to give our feedback regarding the preparatory document *Church Communion*. We hope that our answers to the questions below will support the intention to bring a wider ecumenical perspective to the document.

- 1. Do you think that the CPCE's course of development is properly reflected in part 1 of the document? Which aspects would you like to see further elaborated upon or made more precise?**

The document describes the development of the CPCE and the key challenges to a theological and practical understanding of "church communion" (*Kirchengemeinschaft*) persuasively and honestly. It is also positive that attention is given to the current challenges from the wider ecumenical movement. The evaluation that other churches "...have the impression that the concept of church communion is only to a limited degree suitable as an ecumenical model, in that it models the diversity rather than the unity of the church, and so adds to the strengthening of the status quo" is a good observation which calls for further reflection. It is our view that this challenge and its root causes, which lie in the difference between a sacramental understanding of the church and the functional understanding typical of many Protestant churches, might be given more consideration. This might be effected, for example, by an academic consultation that would serve to increase convergence and consensus in the long term. This would especially promote our common witness and service in the context of European challenges, but it would also do so globally.

From the perspective of the so-called traditional churches, which seek visible unity, some of the document's formulations seem problematic and a little unrealistic because of the unclear distinction between "ground" and "shape". Examples here are: "6. ... Diversity in liturgy and forms of church government are no obstacle to unity." "16. ...The realization of church communion is not ... dependent on a central model of structural unity."



From this perspective it therefore seems logical to conclude: “24. ... In the 1990s it became increasingly clear that within the institutional weakness of the Leuenberg Fellowship, which had been deliberately intended at first, problems had surfaced for which an appropriate solution had to be found.”

The goal of “25....further [developing] ... the structural and juridical shape of the CPCE” would benefit from a highlighting of the theological and spiritual meaning of the “visible” church, its concrete “shape” and its relationship with the “ground”. It has become clear that the basic problem with the CPCE method where a realized communion of the member churches and the perspective of the wider ecumenical movement are concerned is the unclear relationship between “ground” (*Grund*) and “shape” (*Gestalt*).

Para. 36. states that because “... the Porvoo Agreement between the British Anglican churches and the Scandinavian and Baltic Lutheran churches ... took the step to a common exercise in the episcopal office and so to a more visible unity, here also the model of unity and its shaping is closely related to that which was realized in the Leuenberg Church Fellowship”. If the Porvoo model is seen to be close to the Leuenberg model, it would perhaps be beneficial to analyse and reflect on the understanding of apostolicity in the Porvoo Common Statement and the way in which the episcopal ministry is rooted in the church’s understanding of its apostolic mission, and also on how the common faith is presented. As an ecumenical model, Porvoo is closer to the sacramental understanding of communion ecclesiology in the so-called traditional churches than it is to the traditional interpretation of the Leuenberg Agreement. Such a reflection might provide an impulse to develop the Leuenberg model further in theological discussions, for example, with the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

**2. Do you deem that the basic theological foundation of the model of church communion is properly reflected in part 2 of the document? Which aspects would you like to see further elaborated upon or made more precise?**

The expression of the traditionally understood basic theological foundation of the Leuenberg Agreement here is also compatible with the presentation of the key theological ideas in earlier documents, for example: “47. Agreement in the understanding of the gospel is for a Protestant



understanding constitutive both of the communion of the church and also of the communion of the churches (cf. LA 6-12).” And: “59. According to Protestant understanding, the fundamental form in which the church is realized is the communion gathered for the worship of God.”

The ordained ministry is not mentioned in the section concerning “theological foundations”. By contrast, for example, the Lima document (1982) states: “II. A. 8. In order to fulfil its mission, the Church needs persons who are publicly and continually responsible for pointing to its fundamental dependence on Jesus Christ ... The ministry of such persons, who since very early times have been ordained, is constitutive for the life and witness of the Church.” It may therefore be asked how relevant the question of ministry is for the CPCE. Is the worshipping community so independent that it can manage without the ordained ministry? Previous CPCE documents suggest that such a functional understanding of ministry within the CPCE is not supported, whereas these statements suggest this interpretation might be possible. Clarifying this question would assist us to understand the visibility and structures of the church better. It would therefore be good to have a more precise description of the understanding of the role of ordained ministry here.

“58. The church as the communion of saints is based on this event of justification and is at the same time part of it in that it is entrusted with the proclamation of the gospel in Word and Sacrament.” This formulation stresses “the event of justification” more than it does its doctrine. This suggests that the Leuenberg Agreement understands the “*doctrina evangelii*” in the context of proclamation, the word event, and the event of justification. A clear distinction between (historical or regulative) “doctrine” and the act of the proclamation of the “gospel”, or *fides quae* and *fides qua*, is thus presupposed – which the expression “*doctrina evangelii*” in its original meaning and context in CA 7 does not imply. This is linked to problems in the sacramental understanding of the word of God, of proclamation, and of ecclesiology. Key questions for consideration might be the problem of authority and the understanding of the confessional documents as primarily “historical texts”.

**3. Do you deem that the current challenges faced by the CPCE and the model of church communion it represents are properly reflected in part 3?**

Regarding the provisional use of the German term “Verbindlichkeit”, in many ecclesiological contexts – for example in the LWF document *The Self-Understanding of the Lutheran Communion* (2015) – it seems synonymous with “accountability”. If this is the case, the question that arises is how a



balanced relationship between “autonomy” (of local churches) and (their) ecumenical “accountability” in the concrete reality of a communion might be achieved. Accountability in this sense is not a legal term: it is advisable not to be too legalistic or rigid in ecumenical contexts concerning issues that do not belong to the core, or the basic truths of faith and Christian identity. Indeed, this is the basic idea of reconciled diversity.

It is good that para. 69 states that “...the Agreement by no means makes a claim to completeness”. In principle this approach opens opportunities for the further development of the ecumenical model to address the CPCE’s current challenges both within its communion and in its ecumenical encounters.

From a Lutheran perspective we can fully agree that *leiturgia*, *martyria*, and *diakonia* belong to the core of our Christian witness and give expression to our *confessio* (para. 69). However, the relationship between the church’s faith and the various confessional documents remains unclear in the statement that “some participants are bound by certain confessional documents and others by others”. What is their accepted binding role as common rules of faith for the communion as a whole? Does this imply that the LA is to be seen as the ultimate confessional document?

If the intention is to deepen consensus and explain the relationship between “ground” and “shape”, it is important that the document stresses that “[a]ll theological questions, old as well as new, in which the different traditions think differently must be regularly worked over, so that none of them might become divisive and negate the authority of the Agreement”. However, the “authority of the Agreement” should also be worked out and tested theologically. Is the LA itself not another historical text which may be developed further, without the making of presuppositions that become too normative?

It is welcome that the text deals with the contemporary problem of expressing a common and authoritative doctrine: “73. [T]he confessions and the confessional documents ... are often treated as historical texts whose authority has expired. Against this background many current difficulties may probably be explained, not least the difficulty of developing common authoritative doctrine. ... Ecumenical work proves to be an authentic mirror of the internal problems of our individual churches and acts as a strong stimulus to progress the discussion on the meaning and role of *Verbindlichkeit*



of texts of reference.” It might also be asked if at least some interpretations of LA also contribute to the confessional texts being too much considered only as historical documents.

Taking this further, we wonder how precise and analytical the conclusion in para. 74 is: “The history of the reception of the Leuenberg Agreement in the individual churches is the best evidence for its growing authority.”

We agree that the reception of an ecumenical agreement “80. ... requires a particular openness to conciliarity”.

It is gratifying that the CPCE points out that it “82. ... strives to achieve this catholic understanding of unity in dialogue with the Baptist churches, with the Roman Catholic Church and with the Orthodox churches”. It is no less important that it notes that “in many countries new spiritual movements, for the most part with pentecostal or evangelical roots (neo-pentecostals and neo-evangelicals) have arisen...”.

However, where growing ecumenical fellowship and unity are concerned, it is disturbing that in para. 84. a) the document stresses: “Traditionally in many churches catholicity is guaranteed through the exercise of the office of the bishop and the synods of bishops which result from it. As a confessional communion, the CPCE goes in another direction.”

**4. How do you regard the recommendations outlined in part 4? Which suggestions would you wish to emphasize, and which are you sceptical about? Where should the CPCE focus its efforts over the forthcoming years?**

Para. 90: “... [I]t is necessary to strengthen the awareness that the churches of the CPCE are one church and to profess that faith clearly...” From a Finnish Lutheran perspective this conclusion is difficult to support on the basis of the previous formulations: there is no common understanding of this church’s confession. On the basis of LA alone this approach would threaten the identity of a number of confessional traditions, not least the Lutheran. It seems reasonable to suggest that unity without a clear episcopal dimension would further distance Protestants from the so-called traditional churches.



It is our view that regular exchanges of ministers and ecumenical visits are valuable tools for the promotion of growing fellowship and unity. It is also advisable to give member churches themselves more opportunities to suggest themes for doctrinal discussions and to construct a more flexible arrangement for specialist expert groups (para. 107). This would promote a participatory approach that might assist in the reception of documents.

The themes “Ethical Differences and Church Communion” and “Christian Faith and Islam in the Context of the Europe of Today” are likely to be the most relevant themes for the working period following the 2018 assembly.

**5. Do you opine that the suggestion of compiling ‘charta spiritualis’ should be pursued? Should the CPCE clarify the principle of communion on which it is based more clearly in its English title by changing this from the “Community of Protestant Churches in Europe” to the “Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe”?**

From the Finnish Lutheran perspective, it would be good to reflect on the theological and spiritual basis of the principles of church governance within the church as a community of faith and love. For example, in using the consensus method in its decision making, the World Council of Churches has had positive experiences. Consensus promotes listening, as well as decisions that everyone can more easily share in their own context.

For the CPCE to develop as a spiritual communion a “*charta spiritualis*” based on the existing elements of communion and “spiritual commitments” would currently seem to be a more realistic and community-building alternative to a “European Synod”, which would make binding formal decisions. For a traditional Lutheran folk church a “*charta spiritualis*”, with a challenge to be more accountable to other churches, would probably be more challenging than it would be for minority churches with lighter structures and less plurality. However, in our own tradition we already have a Church Order in addition to our Church Law. From a wider ecumenical perspective, it would be good to reflect on how a “Protestant” church order relates to the canonical tradition as a framework in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

We consider it positive that the CPCE appears to be concluding from its theological and ecumenical work and its development that it should change its name to the “Communion of Protestant Churches



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in Europe”, if the word “communion” indicates a willingness to join the already emerging broader ecumenical convergence and consensus concerning communion ecclesiology, especially as presented in the F & O document *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*. However, clarification is needed concerning what precisely is meant by the concept of “church communion” in the CPCE context, both in this document and in the CPCE more generally. As it stands, we find the document’s elaboration of its understanding of the concept of “church communion” insufficient. It is not enough simply to say that this is a new translation of “fellowship” and “Kirchengemeinschaft”. Furthermore, we also feel that ecumenical and ecclesiological development should be reflected here. For example, there are more structures in the Lutheran World Federation that unite its member churches, such as the Augsburg Confession and Martin Luthers’ Catechisms, than are mentioned here.