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Conference of European Churches: Charta Oecumenica – Consultation Process

Statement

by the Committee for Ecumenism of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland
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Introduction

Charta Oecumenica (CO) has been and still is an important ecumenical (and interreligious) inspiration and guideline for European churches – also in our church. Already the original document (2001) encourages the churches to increase their ecumenical cooperation and joint efforts in mission and service in Europe and beyond. It can be seen as the most important ecumenical document prepared by the Conference of European Churches to act as a “framework for ecumenical encounter and common mission”. Important is that not only the Protestant, Anglican, Old Catholic and Orthodox Churches within CEC have signed it but also the Roman Catholic Council of European Bishops’ Conferences (CCEE) in Europe.

CO harvests the fruits of the ecumenical achievements of the modern ecumenical movement in a context when the post-World War II East-West divide seemed to lose its previous ideological relevance and in the context of the 9/11th terrorist attack with a renewed need and understanding for interreligious dialogue and cooperation.

Documents are always contextual and need revision or at least interpretation when aiming to speak in a fresh voice to the contemporary situation. Currently old and new divisions, war and violence, and worrying polarisations, as well as the climate catastrophe, immigration and many kinds of burning existential questions call for reconciliation, trust and hope in Europe and globally. The old vision of CEC as a bridge-builder must be thought anew, and the churches need ways of cooperating in the situation when they are worried about losing members and their former significance in the European societies and searching for answers to the seekers of our time.

The renewed order followed in the CO's content

In chapter 2 *Ecumenism* the part “Listening to the Word of God and Praying Together” has been placed quite in the beginning instead of the former headline “proclaiming the gospel together”. This is logical and in line with the current ecumenical tendency to underline the importance of spiritual ecumenism. Ecumenical work is first and foremost the work of the Holy Spirit through word and prayer. We have already come closer to each other after decades of ecumenical dialogue and cooperation, so that it is mostly relatively easy to listen to the word of God and pray together as Christians of different traditions. Moreover, as for example Dietrich Bonhoeffer taught, we must first listen to God before we can speak of God – and proclaim the gospel together. It is also good that the need for aim deliberately towards “common witness” has been raised clearly up. Since the intention of CO is to promote not only dialogue but also concrete practical action, it is appropriate to add in the end, after the word “dialogue” “and working together”.

The former chapter 3 Common Responsibility is now *Spheres of Encounter*, and there is a new chapter 4 *Fields of Common Engagement in Europe*. This new structure in which the “strengthening community with Judaism”, “cultivating relations with Islam”, and “engaging other religions and world views” are placed after “participating in the building of Europe” makes the text clearer, better structured and makes visible the cooperation of Christian churches with other religions and world views in Europe.

Chapter 4 *Fields of Common Engagement in Europe* gives a clear strategic roadmap for the European churches regarding the most important current societal topics which require our cooperation: peace, safeguarding creation, migration and people on the move, new technologies and digitalisation, and Europe and the world.

In conclusion, the essential content of the revised document is described in a coherent way taken into consideration the situation of the churches, new developments in ecumenical discussion, the interreligious and intercultural aspects and the key European and global challenges.

To help concretely the process to fulfil its aims we would anyhow want to pay attention to the material content of the chapters also in a more detailed way.

I Kerygma

In paragraph 1 *Called Together to Unity in Faith* the content of the Trinitarian faith is unfolded more concretely than before which is good to avoid a two formalistic tone. The approach is typical also to the rest of the document. As such the document is even more encouraging than the original CO and presupposes the willingness of the churches to promote ecumenical operation in joint witness and service. In most cases this is also true and based on the factual, expressed will of churches for example in the Faith and Order document *What the Churches Say about the Church?*: “There is a shift to a renewed passion for mission, both in the sense of transforming injustice and of proclaiming the gospel...” (F&O 2021, para 46). It is good that wider conclusions are drawn from the so-called Lund

principle (F&O conference 1952): "...whether they [Churches] should not act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately?"

However, when underlining the holistic character of ecumenism and the reception of the remarkable achievements we already have, the need for theological and doctrinal ecumenical reflexion and the overcoming of prejudices and the reconciliation of doctrinal condemnations as a part of healing of memories and strengthening unity, witness and service should not be forgotten, and we don't claim it is forgotten here, but we want to emphasize it as a part of the whole. Regarding conceptual ecumenical clarity it might be recommendable to clarify what is needed by "visible fellowship".

From the point of view of encouraging the missionary renewal of churches and the interplay between mission and ecumenism it is helpful that the renewed version emphasizes points out proclaiming the gospel together in a concrete way and the kerygma as a source of unity as a gift of God.

II Ecumenism

In 2. *Listening to the Word of God and Praying Together* the connection between the work of the Holy Spirit, listening to the word of God, praying together and ecumenical work is unfolded more than before but in a sufficiently compact way, which is good. The dimensions of spiritual ecumenism and receptive ecumenism and "walking together" are now also emphasized in the commitments.

3. *Moving towards Common Witness* underlines, importantly, the basis of a holistic ecumenical approach: "Ecumenism therefore begins for Christians with the renewal of our hearts and thereby creating a culture of love and fostering hospitality and trust." Yet in this paragraph even a too positive description of the factual ecumenical situation is given: "We have overcome mutual condemnations". Factually there still are doctrinal condemnations for example from the 16th century which require reconciliation and uplifting based on a possible differentiated consensus. There are also contemporary situations for example in the context of disagreements in anthropology or the misuse of religion to support war and aggression which have brought new tensions and even condemnations. Therefore, it might be better to formulate for example: "We have dealt with and overcome several of the mutual condemnations and walk together towards deeper understanding..."

From this perspective the concrete commitments are here very good and important.

4. *Proclaiming the Gospel Together* explicates the dimensions of holistic mission, including verbal proclamation, in a balanced way. Facing diversity and reaching out to churches with whom we don't have good contacts yet is encouraged in a good manner, and the cooperation between churches in sharing faith and evangelisation. This all can also be seen as a fair and encouraging description of the current ecumenical situation.

5. *Continuing in Dialogue and Working Together* describes more extensively than previously the achievements and concrete every-day forms of ecumenical encounter, and, in comparison to the earlier situation, bilateral and multilateral ecumenical bodies already exist. We endorse the recommendation to increase the cooperation between CEC and CCEE, and with the national forums inspired by the Global Christian Forum. In the commitments we support drawing further conclusions from the above-

mentioned Lund principle in ecumenical cooperation. It is also important to underline the need for a continuing dialogue, especially when the division threatens, and the reception of the past achievements is urgently needed.

III Spheres of Encounter

6. *Participating in the Building of Europe.* The importance of common values and the respect for the Christian spiritual heritage in Europe are important to mention. They are a valuable part of constructing a humane, socially conscious Europe, for the understanding of human rights and the dignity of a person. Regarding the political situation and the need for bridge-building and reconciliation it is necessary to mention the need to work against West-East and North-South divides in Europe. The holistic character of the churches' mission is also described well.

In the 2001 version of CO there was this commitment: “to resist any attempt to misuse religion and the church for ethnic or nationalist purposes.” In the current context where religion is clearly misused for these purposes, we would prefer the old commitment instead of this: “to condemn religious fundamentalism and everything that weakens the bonds that hold us together.” “Religious fundamentalism” can be, and many times is, a dangerous phenomenon which is to be rejected. However, the concept is a fuzzy one, also prone to political and religious misuse itself. It can easily be used not as a scientifically grounded description of a phenomenon but as a branding mark which is aimed to slander the opponent without a fair argumentation. Therefore, the old one seems to be better.

IV Fields of Common Engagement in Europe

The paragraph 7. *Strengthening Community with Judaism* mentions many things which are important also in our context from antisemitism and anti-Judaism to the first Covenant which has not been terminated, and the growing understanding of the deep spiritual familial bond between Christians and Jews as a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is also useful to mention possibilities for cooperation in the light of the common Scriptural and faith tradition, and the need to understand better the presence of the Jewish heritage in our theology and liturgy. Forms of cooperation and interaction can still be developed further also in our context.

The commitment to resign from the institutional mission to the Jews “being still always ready to give personal testimony to Jesus” might be formulated differently. Although the special, not terminated covenantal relationship between Christians and Jews is acknowledged, and thus the special relationship between Jews and Christians in interfaith encounters, and every form of proselytism is rejected, the mission is in a modern way understood as a witness from everywhere to everywhere in the light of freedom of religion. From that point of view institutional mission among the Jews is still seen as a justified position in the work of for example some Finnish mission agencies. Every human being has the right here the gospel. The practical mission work among Jews has emphasized dialogue and supporting the work of Messianic Jews who also have their legitimate freedom of religion. Perhaps the formulation in CO could be: “to resign from proselytising mission to the Jews”.

8. *Cultivating Relations with Islam.* In the renewed version of CO the tradition of Abrahamic religions is emphasized, quite right both the commonalities and differences between Christianity and Islam. It is important to mention the already existing friendly relationships and the need to intensify dialogue between the two traditions in their various forms. Likewise, it is urgent to oppose islamophobia and work together towards peace against any forms of misuse of religion.

9. *Engaging Other Religions and World Views.* We affirm the need “to recognise the freedom of religion and the freedom of conscience and to defend the right to practise faith or belief” and the need to be open to dialogue with all people of good will. Yet this paragraph might need more concrete, encouraging examples.

10. *Striving for Peace in Europe.* When dealing with questions of war and peace it is appropriate to remember also the command to “love your enemy”. Therefor we can only affirm the statement: “...our Christian faith does not allow us to despair of our opponents. Inspired by faith, we do not equate our opponents with their error and do not lose hope for them.” In the same line it is important to not forget the mentioned “acts of forgiveness and reconciliation”.

11. *Safeguarding Creation.* This paragraph includes good, familiar things which can only be supported. In the light of the discussions for example in the context of ecumenical assemblies it might be advisable to make this paragraph even stronger while remembering that as Christians we are stewards of activating hope, not of passivating anxiety. In addition to ecumenical cooperation also interreligious cooperation could be mentioned.

12. *Migration and People on the Move.* Could this paragraph be a bit sharper and concrete in the vision which is expected?

13. *New Technologies and Digitalisation.* The new technologies and digitalisation have changed and change our lives and the realities in which also churches live in Europe and globally. The response of the churches is therefore important to mention here. Defending the dignity of a person and supporting sufficient ethical frameworks are necessary measures also for the churches to support and implement in their own practices.

14. *Europe and the World.* Could in this paragraph the European heritage and history, its inherent potential for renewal be reflected also in a more positive way? There are features in the European history which can be interpreted as examples of the transforming power of the gospel in the history. When aiming to act as a bridge-builder in CEC and in our churches, it might be good to emphasize also listening and dialogue between different kinds of people about the existential fears related to immigration, problems of inculturation, unemployment, poverty, loneliness, the anxiety of the young people and societal changes because of new technologies etc. This might promote a culture of understanding and trust and stabilise our democracies in Europe and beyond.