**Towards the Unity of Protestant Churches in Europe**

**Fifty years of the Leuenberg Agreement**

**It seems natural in our present day that Lutherans and Reformed Christians celebrate Holy Communion together, or that a pastor of one denomination may preach a sermon at the other denomination’s church. But this was not always evident. ~~The~~ Altar and pulpit fellowship was declared in a document entitled the Leuenberg Agreement, signed fifty years ago. The Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) celebrates the anniversary with a series of events. In this interview with Ms Klára Tarr Cselovszky, a member of the CPCE Council and leader of the Department for Ecumenical and Foreign Affairs of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hungary (ELCH), we touched on the significance of this agreement and the anniversary, on its background and its message for us today, as well as on international church organisations, personal motivations, and the situation of women and young people.**

**Dóra Laborczi: The Agreement was signed fifty years ago in Leuenberg near Basel, Switzerland. Why was there need for such an agreement?**

**Klára Tarr Cselovszky:** There had long been a demand within the Protestant churches and congregations in Western Europe – mainly within the Lutheran and Reformed churches – to worship in each other’s churches, that is, to practice the ministry of word and sacrament together. This became possible in 1973 when the Leuenberg Agreement was adopted. There had been no altar and pulpit fellowship among Protestant churches before that time despite the fact that these two denominations have always been close. This rapprochement is particularly interesting and exemplary since the Lutheran and Reformed churches were able to bridge the distance between their teachings of the Lord’s Supper by accepting one another’s liturgical practices, based solely on the Gospel. As a result of this agreement, many Protestant Christians in Western Europe, especially when it comes to the Lutheran, Reformed, and United churches, cannot even tell anymore which denomination they originally belong to. However, the agreement did not have a similar effect in Hungary, even though Hungarian delegates Károly Prőhle and Béla Harmati were present at the signing of the document. The Edict of Torda passed in 1568 was an important precursor to this agreement: it was the first attempt at creating unity among Protestant churches in Hungary. The beginnings of the fellowship between the Reformed and Lutheran churches – which the Methodists joined in time – can be traced back to this point in time.

**D.L.: The acceptance of the Leuenberg Agreement also marked the birth of an organisation.**

**K.T.Cs.:** The Agreement established the Leuenberg Church Fellowship, which was renamed the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE, or Gemeinschaft Evangelischer Kirchen in Europa [GEKE] in German) thirty years later, in 2003. The seat of the organisation was initially in Berlin, then it moved to Vienna. There is a symbolism to this: the Head Office lies in the Austrian capital where it can be reached easily from all directions, east and west, north and south. The staff keep in touch with the member churches, currently a total of ninety-four. Methodist churches in Europe joined the fellowship in 1992. And what’s even more interesting, even though this is a communion of European churches, some Protestant churches in South America – namely in Argentina – also joined its ranks.

**D.L.: A church fellowship implies a joint congregation, common liturgy, joint events. What does this mean in practice for an organisation of this size?**

**K.T.Cs.:** I would like to approach this question by highlighting the ways CPCE is different from other international church organisations. The World Council of Churches (WCC) is the largest such institution spanning the whole world, incorporating not only Protestant but Orthodox and Anglican churches as well. The Lutheran World Federation (LWF) is also a world-wide organisation, albeit with a narrower, denominational focus. There are other international communities on a European level, such as the Conference of European Churches (CEC), an ecumenical fellowship established during the Cold War, which aims to reflect and act on current political and social issues. The CPCE is more church-like than the above. Our projects mainly have a theological focus, and they are aimed at the congregations themselves; we are trying to bring together representations of church life on a European level. Scandinavian, Italian, Slovakian, or Transylvanian Saxon traditions are as much a part of this as, say, German or French Protestantism. There are diverse project groups within the organisation: during this six-year term, Holy Communion has been one of the main topics, alongside with reaching out to young theologians. We also reflect on everyday social issues such as the situation of Euro-orphans. They are children raised by grandparents or other relatives – mainly in Central Eastern Europe – while their parents work in other countries, typically in Western Europe, to support their families.

**D.L.: To celebrate the 50th anniversary of the CPCE, a number of events are being organised, including one in Debrecen, Hungary. Can you tell us more about this event?**

**K.T.Cs.:** We will be holding a conference from 9 to 11 March on ’being church together’. Among the speakers we have Tamás Fabiny, Presiding Bishop of the ELCH; renowned Viennese professor of biblical hermeneutics Ulrich Körtner; Heike Springhart, the newly elected Bishop of Baden; and Michael Weinrich, professor of systematic theology. This conference is an opportunity for encounter and dialogue. It is being organised jointly by the Reformed Church in Hungary (RCH) and the CPCE Council. As a member of the latter, I am part of the preparatory group.

**D.L.: Seventeen years ago, you became a Council member as a young woman, and later held the position of Vice President from 2012 to 2018. How did you first join the Council? Have you seen any changes in the last decade and a half in the way women and young people are approached by European and international organisations?**

**K.T.Cs.:** The six-yearly General Assembly of the CPCE was held in Hungary in 2006. As the local organising church, the ELCH had the opportunity to delegate a member to the CPCE Council. As the then newly appointed leader of the Department for Ecumenical and Foreign Affairs of the ELCH, I was nominated for this task. I joined this circle as a young, female layperson at the very start of my church career, and I have been able to build up a vast network of contacts which I use to the benefit of our church. Being a young person and a woman was a decided advantage in 2006, and there is still an effort within the organisation to involve these social groups. There is no quota system, but it is strongly recommended that if, say, two people were to attend the General Assembly, at least one of them be a woman or a young person.

**D.L.: To circle back to the subject of the anniversary: what is the message of the Leuenberg Agreement today? Have the goals changed in the past fifty years?**

**K.T.Cs.:** I believe the original goal to allow Protestant clergy of different denominations to preach and give communion at each other’s services has been attained. This interchangeability is natural for us today. I am glad we are hosting this conference since it will present Evangelical Lutherans, Reformed Christians, and Methodists with another opportunity to cooperate on many levels: on the academic, clerical, congregational, or church leadership level. The message remains the same, but the ever-changing social and historical situation always requires us to continue working on ecumenical relations so that we can live together, believe together, and be church together.

*Translated from Hungarian.*

*Text: Dóra Laborczi*

*Photos: Márton Magyari*