

## **Towards a renewed dialogue**

### **Prague IV, Geneva, Switzerland, November 28 to December 1 1994**

The meeting held in Geneva, 28 November to 1 December 1994, was the sequel of three previous consultations which brought together representatives of the churches related to the First and Radical Reformations, held in Prague in 1986, 1987 and 1989 (Prague I-III). The churches represented in the first three meetings were Church of the Brethren, Czechoslovak Hussite Church, Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, Hutterian Brethren, Mennonites, Moravians, Society of Friends and Waldensians. The idea behind this initiative was to explore these traditions and their potential contemporary relevance for ecumenical dialogue. It was felt that this would be a visible sign of Christian unity. In a situation of violence and injustice these traditions find particular hope in the transforming and renewing power of the coming reign of God. The First Reformation emphasized the message of the Gospels and the eschatological aspect of the biblical texts. The gospel was understood as the guiding principle for life. The emphasis of the Radical Reformation represented an alternative to Constantinian Christendom. The meetings called for more dialogue on the relation between the perspectives of the First/Radical and Second Reformations which have been seen as complementary.

This consultation in Geneva ("Prague IV") was different. It was organized by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in cooperation with the Lutheran World Federation and the Mennonite World Conference. In addition to the churches mentioned above, participants related to the Lutheran and Reformed tradition were invited. Representatives of the Methodist, Baptist and Roman Catholic churches were also present. This broadened framework was conducive to the discussion and to the outcome of the meeting. The leading question was whether we can arrive at a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of the Reformation. In what way can the new insights renew our churches and enrich the ecumenical discussion today?

This is a *summary* of the papers presented:

Donald F. Durnbaugh discussed the First and Radical Reformations and their relation with the Magisterial Reformation. Member bodies of the First Reformation (Waldensians, Czechoslovak Hussite Church, Unity of Brethren, Czech Brethren) and of the Radical Reformation (Mennonites, Hutterian Brethren, Quakers, Church of the Brethren) share emphases on the ethical demands of the gospel (Sermon on the Mount), eschatological orientation, and a gathered church ecclesiology. Although they accepted many of the core beliefs of the Magisterial Reformation (Lutheran, Reformed), distinct differences remained. Waldensians and Czech Brethren aligned themselves with Reformed bodies partly because of the Calvinist openness to disciplined church communities. Although changed social

conditions in the late 20th century have brought both dissenting and mainstream churches more closely together, there still remain a number of divergent views on substantive doctrinal issues. Responses to the paper by D.F. Durnbaugh were given by V. Bruce Rigdon (Presbyterian) and Ulrich Bubenheimer (Lutheran).

Carter Lindberg asserted that Luther's reform movement is theologically discontinuous from the continuum of medieval renewal movements that lead into and continue in the "Radical Reformation". Luther's reformation differed in kind rather than in degree from those reform movements which preceded him. Carter Lindberg rested this claim for distinguishing Luther's endeavours on his doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone. Does not this emphasis on doctrine over life lead to quietism? This doctrine led to renewed community worship and a new social ethic exemplified in social welfare legislation. Responses to this paper were given by Walter Sawatsky (Mennonite) and Renate Ellwanger (Hutterian Brethren).

Jan M. Lochman was asked to speak about Comenius as an example of the dialogue between two Reformations. Comenius tried to transmit the legacy of the Unity of Brethren to the broader stream of ecumenical Christianity. His critical comments and positive contribution concern especially christology and eschatology. Comenius challenges any temptation to restrict the authority of Christ to the personal or ecclesial realm. The chiliastic elements of his hope help him to relate the kingdom of God to concrete challenges of social and ecclesial history. Christ encourages him not to give up creative discipleship in the service of genuine renewal. In this respect Comenius is the heir of the Czech Reformation and at the same time "a custodian of ecumenical hope."

Hugh Barbour spoke on the Sermon on the Mount in Radical-Reformation traditions, emphasizing Scriptures call to "be perfect as God is perfect". Early Quakers considered perfection a sign of how God works in men and women of faith, and massive lay movements arose among radical reformers to live the "higher law" of perfection previously assumed reserved for monks. Wyclif's Lollards, the Swiss Anabaptists, the Mennonites and Hutterites embodied this calling. Other forms of perfection were self-renunciation, recalling the mystics' *Gelassenheit*, renouncing of possessions in poverty like early church, monastic and Hutterian communities, commitment to transform the world as God's call like Puritans and English Baptists, openness to new leadings of the Spirit like the Quakers, surrendering self-righteousness like Lutheran Pietists, and receiving the infusion of God's love directly into the heart like Moravians and Wesleyans.

Antti Raunio examined the golden rule as the summary of the Sermon on the Mount in the Reformed and Lutheran traditions. Most Reformers (except Melancthon) paid much attention to the golden rule (Mt 7.12). They saw it both as the summary of natural law and of the Sermon on the Mount, both as the source of just legislation and judging and the principle of Christian love. The Reformers interpret the golden rule as precept, which demands a radical change in the "direction" that love must take and does not contain any requirement of reciprocity. Luther and Calvin seem to have thought that the "natural" reason of human beings can also understand the demands of the divine natural law to some degree. Luther, who does not develop theocratic thoughts, sees more possibilities for "outward" justice and participation in the order of love than Calvin. Zwingli and Bucer consider human reason to be so corrupted that natural law can only be understood through faith and therefore worldly government should also be under God's word, which through the Spirit reveals the meaning of natural law and creates the order of love.

Ulrich Luz spoke about the Sermon on the Mount in present biblical scholarship. Matthew's Sermon on the Mount is a challenge for the dialogue between representatives of First Reformation and Radical Reformation churches on one side, Magisterial Reformation churches on the other side, because

1. it understands Christian identity as *praxis*, and not as doctrine or confession;
2. it does not presuppose the axiomatic difference between gospel and law, but rather the (Jewish) category of law as gift of God or salvific law;
3. it is the expression and the basic text of a living, praying and acting community and not of an individual's relation to God.

To mainstream Protestant churches which are looking for a new identity in a situation where the visible identity of their "folk churches" is more and more put in question, this should be a real challenge. In the same way the life and theology of the First Reformation and Radical Reformation churches, for which the Sermon on the Mount was a key passage, could and should be a challenge for them.

Lukas Vischer was given the task of establishing a link between the living legacy of the Reformation and contemporary ecumenical work. The First and the Second Reformations are part of an ongoing history. The message of these movements constitutes a resource for the witness of the Protestant churches and, beyond them, for the ecumenical movement as a whole. The ecumenical movement represents a particular challenge for the churches claiming as their origin the First or the Second Reformations. They need to rediscover the universal horizon which was characteristic of their beginnings. The encounter with other churches in the ecumenical movement is for both of them a new chapter in their ongoing history.

Justification by grace remains central for the witness of the churches of the Magisterial Reformation. But the message of God's grace in Jesus Christ needs to be formulated in the horizon of today's experience. The primary concern must not be to repeat the doctrine of justification but to respond to the threats the suicidal course of the present generation creates for the future of humanity. Justification is justice for the victims of injustice and violence. In the new situation the "ascetic tradition" of Christianity acquires new meaning. Rejected by the Reformers on the ground that salvation cannot be obtained by "meritorious" acts, it needs to be revived today because of its inherent respect of the neighbour and of creation. True law protects life. A dialogue between the First and Second Reformations on Christian lifestyle appropriate for today is called for.

The encounter between the First and Second Reformations inevitably raises the question of the continuity or discontinuity between the two. Though they are similar in many respects, their response to God's word was different. But: as they witness in today's world they discover that they need one another - the resources of their histories are in many ways complementary. The new questions they face lead them beyond the controversies of the past. What is the relationship between justification and sanctification? What does sanctification mean in the horizons of today's crises - social and ecological? How can they witness to true *koinonia* in a time of fragmentation and disintegration of society? A response to this paper was given by André Birmelé (Lutheran).

Konrad Raiser in his paper entitled "Ecumenical Agenda for Today and Tomorrow" recalled the original impetus of the ecumenical movement and

underlined the necessity for reassessment. The search for a visible unity of the church has reached a decisive stage. There is a growing convergence in the conviction that *koinonia* and *diakonia* belong inseparably together. A new challenge comes from Pentecostal, charismatic, evangelical and other movements. Nowadays, Christian churches witness often in the context of renascent world religions and cultures. The question of indigenization and inculturation of the gospel has been raised with a new vigour. We are faced with the question of how to preserve the oneness and unity between indigenous expressions of the faith. Another challenge is the ecological threat to survival. We learn to see that God's *oikumene* is the whole of creation, the "one household of life". The emphasis on theology of life is an attempt to spell out a life-centred ethos promoting a culture of sharing and solidarity. We are at the threshold of the ecumenical movement where a new articulation of an ecumenical vision is emerging.

## I

We have learned from each other as heirs of the First and Second Reformations. We have learned that our historical experiences are different. Heirs of the and Radical Reformations have found energy, direction and vision in the Sermon on the Mount sufficient to sustain their witness even in the face of their exclusion from the power structures of Christendom. Heirs of the 16th century Reformation have found resources in the classical doctrines of their traditions for speaking to the human situation and shaping the history and culture of national communities.

More important, we have begun to learn now to help each other by claiming our histories and traditions as common resources which help us to respond to the dilemmas and possibilities of the future. We recognized that the world in which we seek to live as Christians is one in which ever greater numbers of people are being marginalized in relation to employment, political participation, education, human rights, health, and access to scarce resources.

We have started to understand that we are not simply different churches, but different bodies within one greater church with a complementary function for each other. Churches which are heirs of the First or of the Radical Reformations, with their intensive community and their distinctive Christian life, might assume a role towards the mainstream Reformation churches which is somewhat similar to the role of the monastic orders in the Roman Catholic Church. They can remind them of the importance of a new life for Christian identity. On the other hand, the mainstream Reformation churches preserve a treasure of theological thoughts which they might be able to share with churches whose origin is the First or Radical Reformations. The time has come to realize that the First Reformation, the Magisterial Reformation and the Radical Reformation are not the particular heritage of one or another church, but our common heritage. Only then will we be able to enter together into the process of the ongoing Reformation.

We confess that our church institutions and structures are not designed for witness and ministry in such situations and are simultaneously experiencing increasingly severe reductions in members and funds, thus producing a survival mentality and outlook.

We want to continue this process of sharing in order to claim from our past the insights and experiences which may equip us to live into yet another reformation of the church and its mission in the 21st century. We believe that such a reformation requires that we think and act ecumenically.

For our future conversations we want to look more deeply at situations in which churches have had to learn to witness without recourse to the use of power, such as Central and Eastern Europe.

### **III**

The Third World participants who were present observed that while reflecting on the heritage of European Reformations (both the First and Second), they could see a parallel to this movement in their own situations. Like the European reformers, their struggle is how to make the Christian faith which they have received through Western missionary activities more contextual.

Probing into one's own historical heritage is basically searching for one's own identity. As long as the search for such identities is not for promoting exclusive claims nor for serving parochial interests they have a positive contribution to make in the development of a holistic sense of community. Churches which are successors to the First and Second Reformations have to raise the question of how sensitive they were when they transmitted their heritage to a different human community. In many cases, unknowingly, they considered their heritage absolutely unique and imposed it on others as they engaged in the proclamation of the gospel.

Relationships with people of other faiths was an issue that was raised by some participants and was endorsed by the Third World participants. Is there any valuable insight from the First and Second reformers on this matter? The First and Second Reformation Christians were not living in a totally mono-Christian situation. At least in some situations they had to interact with Jews and Muslims. Did their preoccupation with the church and the Christian community prevent them from relating to the larger society both in their immediate surroundings and elsewhere in Europe?

### **IV**

We expressed deep appreciation for the valuable and important insights of these days. We rejoice that the Prague conversations on Reformation were broadened to include voices from the 16th century Magisterial Reformation.

We call for continued dialogue and a yet more expanded circle of participants. We wish more fully to engage the practical concerns that arise in living our faith in difficult and diverse cultural and ecclesial contexts in relation to the theological considerations and historical legacies we treasure.

We desire another gathering, with continued emphasis on Reformation as the church's response to God's life-giving presence in each age and place. We suggest focusing on questions around God's acceptance of us and human transformation. Avoiding technical theological language, we might ask how we talk about what God is doing among us in the whole created order, among humankind, in the church, and in personal lives. Or, how we discern and embody marks of the church amid the challenges of our societies. How we learn from our forbears' suffering and marginalization as we face cultural marginalization or diminishment.

We cherish each tradition's commitment to its legacy. We honour the particularities of one another's faith and praxis, and seek to support and learn from each other as all learn deeper faithfulness incarnating our

legacy in our age and place.

We wish to hear the theological depth of each tradition's confessions, express the convergence as well as divergence of our convictions, to learn as fully as possible from each Reformation's insights for contemporary faith and to express our communion in and as Jesus' living, risen body, the church.