

Lutheran - Mennonite International Study Commission
Strasbourg, France, 18 – 22 June 2007

Communiqué

The third meeting of the Lutheran – Mennonite International Study Commission took place from 18 to 22 June 2007 at the Institute for Ecumenical Research in Strasbourg, France.

This Study Commission is sponsored by the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the Mennonite World Conference (MWC).

Lutheran members are: Prof. Dr Timothy J. Wengert, acting co-chair (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA), Bishop Litsietsi M. Dube (Bulawayo, Zimbabwe), Prof. Dr Annie Noblesse-Rocher (Strasbourg, France), Prof. Dr Theo Dieter, consultant (Director, Institute for Ecumenical Research, Strasbourg, France), and Prof. Dr. Marc Lienhard, consultant (Strasbourg, France).

Mennonite members are Rev. Rainer Burkart, co-chair (Neuwied, Germany), Prof. Dr Claude Baecher (Hegenheim, France), Ms. Hellen Biseko Bradburn (Arusha, Tanzania), Dr. Larry Miller, co-secretary (General Secretary, MWC, Strasbourg, France), and Prof. Dr. John Roth (Goshen, Indiana, USA).

This year the Commission deeply regretted the resignation for reasons of health of its co-chair Prof. Dr Gottfried Seebass (Lutheran), as well as the absence of co-secretary, Rev. Sven Oppegaard, who has left the post of Assistant General Secretary for Ecumenical Affairs, LWF. Commission members warmly welcomed the addition of Prof. Dr. Lienhard to the Commission.

At the national level Lutheran-Mennonite dialogues have been conducted in France (1981-1984), Germany (1989-1992) and the USA (2001-2004). The present Commission's mandate is to hold conversations that focus on the condemnations of Anabaptists in Lutheran confessional writings and their applicability to MWC member churches today. The conclusions will be presented to the Lutheran World Federation and the Mennonite World Conference for possible action.

The important task at hand involves a serious consideration of what it means for Lutherans to have within their confessional writings doctrinal condemnations which contributed to the persecution, torture and killing of Anabaptists at the time of the Reformation. This effect of the condemnations and supporting statements by the Lutheran reformers does not figure prominently in the reading of the Reformation among Lutherans today outside the circle of historical scholars. The history of persecution has, however, been deeply imbedded in the memory of Anabaptist descendents and requires careful joint processing in order that obstacles may be removed for the sake of better understanding and closer relations between Mennonite and Lutheran churches today.

This processing requires both an accurate understanding of the condemnations in their historical context and the hermeneutics of the Lutheran confessions. It further requires joint theological reflection on the specific issues with which the condemnations are concerned, in particular baptism and the relationship between church and civil authorities, as well as on the variety of positions currently held on these issues within each communion.

Last year the Commission heard and discussed papers on the sense in which Mennonites see their tradition as going back to sixteenth century Anabaptists, then focused systematically on the condemnations in their *theological* context. Some articles were seen not to apply to Mennonites and their forbears in the faith. Particular attention was given to the condemnation regarding baptism in Article 9 of the Augsburg Confession and the condemnation regarding civic affairs in Article 16 because these are articles seen to contain serious theological differences between the two traditions.

At this year's meeting, the Commission

- Reviewed the recent "Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Condemnations of the Anabaptists" and the response of the Mennonite Church USA.
- Discussed "'Called Together to be Peacemakers:' Report of the International dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Mennonite World Conference (1998-2003)."
- Reviewed the text of the Imperial Mandate of Speyer of 1529 and a variety of Anabaptist sources related to themes addressed in the Augsburg Confession (Baecher).
- Heard and discussed papers on "The Sociopolitical Statements of the Augsburg Confession and the Rejection of the Anabaptists" (Lienhard), "Systematic Reflections about the Problems with which Confession of Augsburg Article 16 Deals" (Dieter), and "Christians and the Public Order: the Church and the World in Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspective" (Burkart).
- Worked towards consensus on an historical account of the "Lutheran Reformers and the Condemnations of the Anabaptists" (drafted by Roth and Wengert).
- Developed an outline of the final report for submission to the LWF and MWC.

It is the intention of the Study Commission to present the final report to the Lutheran World Federation and the Mennonite World Conference by the end of 2008. The Lutheran World Federation may then take action on the conclusions and proposals of the Study Commission at its next General Assembly (Stuttgart, 2010), to which the Mennonite World Conference will respond.

The final meeting of the Commission will take place in Strasbourg from 3-6 June 2008.
