

AREA DESK FOR EUROPE

INTRODUCTION

Looking back, this was a year of communicating and sharing all across Europe. Numerous consultations and visits offered space for churches and partners to exchange concerns and experiences, to network and intensify relationships, and in some instances to struggle together with divisive and tense issues. The Lutheran communion showed itself as a community of churches which, due to their respective history, hold different points of departure for their theological identity, and for the self-understanding of their position in society. In their commitment to building up a Lutheran “House of Europe”, in an ecumenical spirit, churches still need to get to know one another better regarding identity building backgrounds.

HIGHLIGHTS OF MAIN PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

Regional Meeting of the LWF Member Churches in the Baltic States and Russia Vilnius, Lithuania, September 25-28

The LWF is an important instrument of the member churches in facilitating communication and common action in response to common challenges. There is a continuing need for churches to come together on sub-regional levels, to deepen knowledge of one another, to build trust, and to overcome hindrances of communion. This was the conclusion of the 30 participants in Vilnius who were leaders from the LWF member churches in the Baltics, Russia, and the representatives from partner churches in western and northern Europe and North America.

One focus of the consultation was on missionary challenges today, based on the LWF Mission Document “Mission in Context”. It was noted that lay people, especially women, are the missionaries in their neighborhoods and in their secular professional lives. They are the ones who keep up and search for an authentic spiritual life. The transformation of the whole human being through God’s spirit was seen as the heart of mission. Methods to accompany individuals and one another as churches in their spiritual growth are a special interest of the churches in the sub-region.

Diakonia and proclamation were unanimously understood as belonging together in the one missionary calling of the church. In the reconstruction of the churches in the Baltic countries and in Russia, this has been an important experience.

A committed discussion on the issue of human sexuality was seen by many participants as a highlight of the meeting. This topic concerns all churches in depth, and therefore interest in sharing standpoints was high. The theme should be continued in future church leadership consultations, with special attention to theological and biblical hermeneutical interpretation.



Eucharist celebration at the opening worship in the Lutheran church in Vilnius. Liturgists distributing the Eucharist: Bishop Maria Jepsen, and Superintendent Andreas Lange, both Germany.

Pre-conference visitation program in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Lithuania

Some participants, including the LWF Europe Secretary, visited parishes and projects in the southwestern part of the country prior to the conference. Once, this church had more than 250.000 members. After the Second World War, it had been decimated to 21.000 members. This small church, in a Catholic majority context, is being led by young people with an average age of 30. They are highly dedicated to rebuilding their church. This is especially notable in a country which suffers from an exodus of its young and educated people to growing economies in Western Europe and overseas. “Everybody is leaving, only pastors and priests stay”, we were told. We learned about this young church’s story of hope.

Church buildings have been given back by the State, mostly in desperate condition after having been turned into sports halls, barns or warehouses. Some Western partners have not only helped with funds and furniture, but have come to lay their own hands in reconstruction work, thus intensifying partnership in a holistic, communion-oriented way. Looking forward creatively, the church’s plan is to build centers of church life in focal urban points, as migration from the rural areas is high.

In the city of Klaipeda, the church is supporting the development of the theological faculty at the university. About 160 students are enrolled at the faculty, half of them studying in correspondence courses with a personal interest in religion. The faculty has an important missionary function. It serves several generations of people who, under communism, had been wounded in their dignity and self worth. Lithuanian poets express their people’s quests for being comforted and dignified. Here, Lutheran spirituality can play an important role.



Plenary at the Regional Meeting in Vilnius. Chair: Ms. Milita Poskiene, Lithuania, speaker: Rev. Dr. Kjell Nordstokke, Director, DMD

Sub-regional workshop on Church-State Relationships in Transitional Contexts of Society

Moravske Toplice, Slovenia, October 8-10

“I am impressed by the self-confident, creative and sustainable attitude of the churches in South Eastern Europe, in raising their profile in society with resources which would seem much too scarce for us in the larger Western European churches,” commented a participant of the workshop which brought together 10 participants from the LWF member churches in Slovenia, Croatia, Romania, Italy and Sweden.

In South Eastern Europe, the post-communist countries have adopted the neutrality of state institutions in relation to religion, and, according to overall EU standards, have integrated freedom of religion. The small Lutheran churches are experiencing their societies as opening up ecumenically, even in contexts of traditional confessional hegemonies. Society is interested in religious pluralism and is even asking for the Protestant contribution. For the churches, this implies two challenges: openness for ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue and a stronger reflection on one’s own Lutheran position.

From an Orthodox majority context, another issue arose. The integration of Eastern Orthodox countries into the EU not only leads to the challenge of an inner cultural reform of the EU, but also to ecumenical relations. Prejudiced images about East and West go back to long before the cold war, to the time of enlightenment - contrasting a developed (Western) against an underdeveloped (Eastern) Europe, and claiming that the last would need to adapt to the more successful (Western) model to belong to Europe. Quoting the Romanian theologian André Scrima, the workshop participants acknowledged the challenge for Occident and Orient to make room for one another in their hearts as a precondition for growing together, both politically and ecumenically. “Reciprocal communication in Europe needs a new culture of listening”, one participant said, “we have to learn to listen without reacting immediately. Instead, we should allow what we hear to work within us and see what will grow from it.”



Cooking new concepts for church-state relationships in societies in transformation, from left to right: Bishop Geza Ernisa (Evangelical Church A.C. in Slovenia), Rev. Simona Prosic-Filip (Slovenia), Rev. Dieter Kampen (Italy), Rev. Dr. Eva-Sibylle Vogel-Mfato (DMD Europe Secretary), Dr. Monica Vlad (Romania), Ms. Mirjana Valasek (Croatia), Dr. Annette Leis (Sweden).

Visits to member churches and ecumenical partners

“Apostolic visit” of an LWF delegation to the Evangelical Church A. C. in Poland

June 1-4

“To be an apostle means to share with one another in the one global communion.” said LWF General Secretary Rev. Dr. Ishmael Noko, at the beginning of this visit. He led the delegation with a goal of getting to know the Lutherans in Poland and strengthening Lutheran global communion. The delegation came together with a large range of the church’s leadership and institutions, as well as with representatives of the Catholic Church, and political leaders. Members of the delegation expressed their respect for what they learned: “I experienced the Polish Lutheran Church as a small church, like our own young church, with considerable ‘courage to be’ to profile itself, and rather boldly stand side-by-side other actors for the transformation of the community,” said Bishop Thomas J. Barnett from Sierra Leone. Impressive moments during the visit included being present at the renaming of the Diaconal Centre in Wroclaw after Martin Luther and laying flowers at the Bonhoeffer monument, a martyr of the resistance movement against the Nazi regime who was born in Wroclaw. Deacon Cristina Kilian from Argentina underlined the strong sense of community and the overwhelming hospitality. “Many women who act in the background or at the margins of structures contribute essentially to the life of this church. There should be more interest in reflecting on this and on the role of women in ministry,” she said.



In Wroclaw, members of the LWF delegation laid flowers in front of the Dietrich Bonhoeffer memorial. Left to right: Dr. Jamilin Sirat (Indonesia), Deacon Cristina Kilian (Argentina), Bishop Thomas J. Barnett (Sierra Leone), LWF General Secretary Rev. Dr. Ishmael Noko, and Rev. Dr. Eva-Sibylle Vogel-Mfato, LWF Area Secretary for Europe.

Visit to the Evangelical Church in Croatia (ECC)

October 11-13

The ECC is still in the process of becoming a church, bringing together people from very diverse ethnic, social and spiritual backgrounds. The parishes are used to independence from central oversight structures.

The partners of ECC met twice in 2006, on March 20 and 21 in Leipzig, Germany, and from December 11-13 in Geneva. In both meetings, they stated the need in the ECC to enhance dialogue among the different conflicting parties and to ensure transparency on all levels of the church's administration and decision making. The work on lack of clarity in the constitution also has to be continued. Growing awareness is needed among partners about their own role in the conflict. Both partners' meetings focused on close communication and transparency among the partners.

Other visits

Visits have important functions of getting to know member churches in their own contexts and to enhance networking and communication. In Germany, in March 2006, the Europe Secretary visited Martin-Luther-Bund in Erlangen, and the offices of the German National Committee in Hanover. A meeting in Berlin on June 13 brought together partners of the ELCROS Seminary in Novosaratovka, Russia. An invitation to speak about "Positions of Lutheran churches in Europe, their diversity and common identity within their secular and ecumenical contexts" brought the Europe Secretary to a pastors' meeting of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saxonia in Dresden, Germany on November 6. Another visit followed to the Evangelical Lutheran Synod meeting of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands on November 10-11.



Rev. Jana Kerčmar (Slovenia) showing Dr. Annette Leis (Sweden) a wall carpet with the Lutheran church buildings in Slovenia.

Projects

Four projects were brought before the DMD Project Committee and adopted in 2006. They focused on special challenges within Europe.

Two projects from ELCROS respond to the growing HIV and AIDS crisis in the former Soviet Union. Churches are specifically equipped to reach out to affected people and can build on their position in society to cooperate with other actors in educational prevention measures, such as training the youth through school programs in the city and district of Odessa, Ukraine.

The riots in the suburbs of French cities brought public attention all over Europe to the problems of racism, and social exclusion. The Lutheran Church of France, with its Inner Mission in Paris, is responding to the spiritual and social needs of the large, black immigrant communities in its neighborhood.

In Slovakia, the Evangelical Church A.C. is building up its post-university and continuing formation program for young pastors in order to equip them with reflective and practical tools to connect theology and the challenges of ministry in a society experiencing rapid transformation.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Closure of the Regional Office in Central and Eastern Europe for the Expression of Communion (ROCEE)

This LWF program came to an end June 30 and the office in Bratislava closed. Between 2003 and 2006, it had been a special tool for the communion of the churches in Central and Eastern Europe. Through pastoral visits, consultations, workshops, and many encounters, common needs and challenges were identified. Numerous activities enhanced the exchange of experiences and mutual support, as well as regional and sub-regional cooperation. DMD expressed its gratitude to the Regional Officer, to his assistant and to the churches in the region for their commitment and support.

Challenges ahead

The special focus on Central and Eastern Europe will remain important for the Lutheran European agenda. Many countries from that region became members of the European Union (EU) in 2004. On January 1, 2007, Romania and Bulgaria will join the EU. The growing together of the political Europe offers new possibilities for the churches in the member countries. Inter-church relations and support, through the exchange of staff and joint thematic projects are being intensified. On the other hand, inclusive communion beyond EU borders will need to be strengthened for the sake of those churches whose countries remain outside the political union.



In vivid discussion, from left to right: Archbishop Dr. Edmund Ratz (ELCROS), Bishop Arri Kugappi (The Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Ingria in Russia), Rev. Tapio Leskinen (Finland/Evang.-Luth. Church of Ingria in Russia), Rev. Peeter Kaldur (Estonia), Archbishop Elmars E. Rozitis (Latvian Evang.-Luth. Church Abroad), Archbishop Janis Vanags (Latvia), Ms. Kadri Eliisabeth Pöder (Estonia), Archbishop Andres Pöder (Estonia), Rev. Dr. Eva-Sibylle Vogel-Mfato in front.

At the same time, awareness is growing for cross-cutting concerns of the churches in all parts of Europe. This relates especially to social and economical issues, both gaps and potentials, in the course of globalization. The churches recognize the many common challenges from secularization and post-modern spiritual yearning for mission and accompanying people in the fullness of Christian spirituality.



Rev. Dr. Eva-Sibylle Vogel-Mfato
Area Secretary for Europe

