

*Michael Weinrich*

## Educational Church<sup>1</sup>

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Ladies and gentlemen, dear sisters and brothers,

on behalf of its council and presidium I deliver you warm greetings from the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe – the former “Leuenberg Church Fellowship”. Thank you very much for the invitation and the opportunity to participate in your interesting international conference on confirmation work, although only for some hours. In Wittenberg, where the council of CPCE met recently, the first draft of an extended paper with the title “Education for the future” was on our manifold agenda, drafted by the South-East Europe Regional Group of CPCE. This paper is still in process and will possibly be published during our next general assembly in Basel in Sept. 2018. It gives an impressive account of the wide-ranged educational activities in the respective Churches that underline the centrality of educational issues for the churches and our community. But it is most astonishing indeed that confirmation work plays only a marginal role in this document yet. So I have to realize that there is more than enough we could and should learn from you, even if this recent paper represents by far not all, what is achieved in the educational field by CPCE. I will come back to this later.

Dear friends, I will make three short points from CPCE-perspective not so much to your current theme but to its common framework in the landscape of the European churches.

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<sup>1</sup> Statement at the international conference on „Confirmation Work in Ecumenical and International Perspectives” from the perspective of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe at the Augustinerkloster Erfurt on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017.

## 1. The Leuenberg Agreement and education

In 2013 we celebrated the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first signing of the Leuenberg Agreement declaring church-communion between the churches from the Lutheran and the reformed Traditions. Anniversaries always are opportunities for taking stock, and so it was regarding the Leuenberg Agreement. Under many other aspects it was repeatedly underlined that the particular quality of the Leuenberg Agreement lies in the fact that it describes more a process than a fixed concept of the conditions for being a communion of churches. The agreement was a result of quite a number of intensive consultations, but it not so much about a final result than an ongoing process. The agreement did not just highlight a full stop but it was also explicitly set as a colon for a process to come. In this case the question of reception, which reveals time and again the quandary of so many ecumenical documents, is a capital issue of the document itself and not an open question possibly arising after the document finalized. The reception of ecumenical documents is by far not a self-initiating process. Remember that meanwhile four enormous volumes “Growth in Agreement I-IV”, where many ecumenical document got their final grave because of the missing reception by the respective churches. Pointedly one could say that in ecumenical agreements the whole thing is about reception, otherwise they are not really important. The anniversary of the Leuenberg Agreement luckily did not have to celebrate a meanwhile aged and almost forgotten document but was in the position to remember a living process that already achieved a lot. The opportunity was taken to reconsider the way so far in order to find its proper direction for the future. This process is not firstly an example of continuing reformation – in terms of *semper reformanda* – but an example of an explicit educational existence. It was not so much about change but about developing and achieving something by doing theological, ethical and liturgical work to strengthen the communion of

churches. In this sense CPCE is an educational fellowship both from its idea and in its perspective. Please note: One can be an educational movement or even an educational institution without dealing with educational issues all the time. In my understanding CPCE was and will be such an educational movement and institution. I come to my second point:

## 2. CPCE and education

Beyond the stressed reality that CPCE as such can be seen as a kind of educational movement I also may emphasize that CPCE also should take up increasingly explicit educational issues, and without any question confirmation work is one of the central educational questions in all of our member churches. We do not have to start from scratch. At least at its general assembly in Budapest 2006 the question of education in its more or less full range was put explicitly on the agenda of CPCE and meanwhile there are different CPCE publications and documents on different educational themes, especially in respect to the theological education and continuing theological education of pastors in fulltime position as well as on honorary basis. In the context of the general assembly in Florence 2012 a comprehensive volume was published with the heading: Formation of Faith. Handling down Faith in European Protestantism. In this volume our general secretary, Bischof Michael Bünker, shows up the importance of educational responsibility of churches and stresses the increasing engagement of CPCE in this regard. And then you find contributions to more or less the full range of educational perspectives for the churches including confirmation work worked out by people from all over Europe including some who also bear responsibility for this big international conference here in Erfurt. And so you may be sure that CPCE will be mostly interested in learning from the results of your meeting. There will be a second revised draft of the document from our South-East Europe Regional Group, what I mentioned in

my introduction and what is linked with a series of conferences on European level on “Education for the Future”, and I already gave a hint to the drafting group for the revision to spend more attention to confirmation work than it is included yet.

### 3. Burning issues

Let me start with a quotation from Heid Leganger-Krogstad from Norway: “Every generation is a new generation to be Christened.” We are not born as Christians, and Christianity would fade away if there were no special efforts to hand it over to the next generation. That is one of the reasons why we are here. And we know that the circumstances, under which this process of handing down the content and the shape of faith, are changing continuously, so we have to rethink the ways and perspectives anew and anew on the background of the respective reality not only in the churches but also in our societies. In this respect the whole self-understanding of the church is at stake. Asking for the future is asking for the appropriate character of the being of the church. And at the same time asking for the future means to realize contemporary changes and expectable changes.

I just mention three interconnected aspects that are probably not new for you:

1. Although some do proclaim an arising comeback of religion this will not really cease the increase and spreading of secularization in terms of the life-style of our modern and individualistic societies. I do not favor the position that secularization is only a threat. It also can be a chance, but this chance is not emerging by itself. Secularization can go into the direction of an agnostic society with aggressive attitudes against any religious belief or into the direction of a civil-society that cultivates the fruitfulness of a plurality that promotes a responsible and beneficial way of living together. But this latter perspective will not

happen just by accident. It needs some driving forces, and the religions should be involved in developing sustainable living conditions for our civil-societies. In my understanding religious education is a pivotal aspect also for the public educational system as well as for the life of the religions.

2. Although some do proclaim a comeback of religion I am not really sure if we can look forward to this or better should fear it. We observe worldwide a rapid increase of fundamentalist tendencies. If they are not aggressive explicitly they are implicitly. Fundamentalism in my understanding is more an ideology than a religion. Here is not the place to explain this. The distinction follows the criterion if the respective attitude promotes sensibility or aggression. Fundamentalism is authoritarian and combative and sometimes even militant, in any case aggressive against pluralism and diversity. We need religious education to prevent fundamentalism. With fundamentalists it is hard or even impossible to discuss, so fundamentalism has to be prevented before it gains a foothold. If it is established it is more or less impossible to defeat it effectively. Here we find also strong reasons to have appropriate religious education not only in the churches and religions but also in the public educational system.

3. For the survival of our societies it becomes more and more decisive that new forms of participation will be developed. Secularization tends to turn into fatalism and irrationalism. Currently the basis of our democratic constitutions is at stake and it is not really foreseeable in which direction we will go. We observe different forms of escapism and privatization as well as simplistic and populist enhances of rage and hate. In our societies there is less really loadable cohesion so it is very prone for any crisis. We cannot get rid of self-obsessed individualism and increasing political irrationalism just by engaging some educational work, but nevertheless these challenges should be in view

in all of our educational efforts. It is not just a question of ethics rather than a question of self-understanding and hope, and churches should have something to offer in this respect.

And it is for sure that one fundamental basis of this educational imperative is confirmation work. I have to confess that I was not so much aware of your excellent work you already did in this area on an European level. Obviously there should be an improvement of communication and hopefully also of interaction between your prolific work and CPCE. Confirmation work still waits for being discovered in CPCE and in our next meeting of the presidium in Vienna in June I will give a report of your functioning European network. So I will end with best wishes for all of your considerations about this important field not only for the future of the churches but also for our post-modern societies, and I hope CPCE can and will profit from the results of this conference and probably will find ways of a closer connection between you and our efforts on educational issues.

*Paderborn, den 2. Mai 2017*