

Working Group 5|1

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„The Church has always existed and it will always exist. But because God from the beginning would have men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth (I Tim. 2:4), it is altogether necessary that there always should have been, and should be now, and to the end of the world, a Church.” The 2nd Helvetic Confession opens up the true horizon of the origin and mission of THE Church, which – as described by the Hungarian reformed theologian of the 20th century, Ervin Vályi Nagy - is actually it/herself the “Dialogue of God with the world”. With a world and human kind with its multiple and puzzling diversity, which has ever been there, is at the same time in revolt against God and his redeeming plan, AND reconciled with Him in Jesus Christ.

Reading through the document I couldn't help but invoke this final, eschatological perspective, even if I knew that I would miss my actual task here. It is a theologically sobering fact, that an ancient confessional writing - an official confession of my church still today -, which dates back to the very time of the Reformation that in the end effect further divided the Church and therefore raised the question of denominational identity within Christianity; so this confession speaks with such an evidence with the one Church of Christ whose “heartbeat” is the mission. Means to proclaim and live out in its community the saving will of God for all.

This deep, faith based insight is similarly expressed in our ecumenical vision confirming Unity in mission in so many documents we together adopted (and never truly implemented): “The purpose of God according to Holy Scripture is to gather the whole of creation under the Lordship of Jesus Christ in whom, by the power of the Holy Spirit, all are brought into communion with God (Eph. 1). ... The purpose of the Church is to unite people with Christ in the power of the Spirit.” (Canberra statement – Faith and Order Commission, WCC)

What can we learn from this eschatological perspective of God's Kingdom – which actually I miss from the document? Even if I know that the reference to “God's Mission” in the first thesis is supposed to represent this perspective and this paper intends to offer concrete theses to be owned and implemented by the Protestant Church of Westphalia in your own context today. Still.

First of all, the above consideration supports my consent with the principles outlined in the 2nd thesis; affirming diversity, joining forces with others irrespective of their religious and social background for positive change in society and in all this strengthening the evangelical profile – which actually is the prerequisite for larger cross-denominational, inter-religious and –cultural cooperation for the “good of the city” (Jer. 29,7). In this, advocating for freedom of religion, as core human right, and “practice” it in terms of solidifying with persecuted Christian communities shall be a common ground for all of us, as I'm convinced.

Allow me some more or less concrete reflections, though:

1. You are not alone in your struggle to be(come) a faithful church. The Church has ever struggled to witness about the Gospel in words and deeds faithfully (and missed this mission again and again irrespective of its actual context). But the “hic et nunc” aspect of this task shouldn't make you forget that we actually speak about the Church's only task from the

very beginning: the communication of the Gospel. To put it simply, let me quote Apostel Peter: “*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.*” (1 Pet 3,15) We are called to offer a living narrative, even “apology of hope” in any circumstances. We share in this struggle with you, as do all the churches, at times even under persecution, who are not only partners, but members of the same Church, and in your case concretely of the same fellowship in the United Evangelical Mission.

2. In this regard I feel like that this second thesis should be preceded by the 8th thesis. I’m saying this because offering insights and forms about the “inviting communication of the Gospel”, or a “narrative a hope” would make a clearer link between “Missio Dei” and the above outlined eschatological-soteriological perspective of the Mission of the Church, reflected both in 16th century confessional writings and 20th ecumenical vision, would help identify the principles for a Christian/Evangelical/Westphalian engagement in society.
3. That “Protestant voice in one voice among many” might seem to be a new experience, based on the social developments of the past decades in Germany, but we shouldn’t forget that – although it can be perceived as a challenge in the given context – generally spoken pluralism has ever been the context of the communication of the Gospel. This experience, however perplexing it might be, leads you (back) to the roots of being Church of Christ.
4. Therefore we share one “great” perspective of redemption about the world under the light of the coming kingdom of God. This shall be our joint “perspective-bound” truth of faith, before we “get loose”. And this presents us with the actual challenge. Don’t take it wrong, I don’t want to minimize the challenge the Church faces “from there outside”; pluralisation and digitalization of society and the changing religious landscape. The main challenge for the Church is the Church itself. The question is namely whether and how far we together, but also the community of EKvW truly own those principles for social engagement of our churches, and consider them as “necessary” consequences of our commitment to the Gospel: *human rights, religious freedom, integration, participation, sustainable development, good and constructive social coexistence.*

I leave this question, which I believe is at the core of the challenge the 2nd thesis present, with the reminder, that in many ways this has been not only discussed in Europe, but also agreed upon as expressed eG. in the Charte Oecumenica - but never truly implemented:

„We are committed to recognise the freedom of religion and conscience of these individuals and communities and to defend their right to practise their faith or convictions, whether singly or in groups, privately or publicly, in the context of rights applicable to all; and to be open to dialogue with all persons of good will, to pursue with them matters of common concern, and to bring a witness of our Christian faith to them.” (Charta Oecumenica, 2001)