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“Christian Presence and its Witness in the Future of Europe”

Keynote for the panel at the CEC General Assembly by Bishop Petra Bosse-Huber,
Evangelical Church in Germany

Your Eminences and your Excellencies,

Members of the General Assembly,

Sisters and brothers,

I. The situation in Europe and challenges facing the churches

The member churches of the Conference of European Churches are the visible expression of the fact that, ecumenically speaking, Europe is more than the European Union of the (still) 28 member states. Its membership extending beyond the EU makes up CEC's denominational, theological and spiritual wealth. There is good reason for this and it is an important sign of ecumenical bonds with the local churches that this General Assembly is taking place in Serbia and we can enjoy the wonderful Serbian hospitality, even though Serbia is (still) not an EU member. Let me take this opportunity to say a cordial "hvala lijepa" for your warm welcome and generous hospitality. At the West Balkan summit in Sofia on 17 May 2018 the EU heads of state or government, together with their partners in the West Balkans, again affirmed the whole region's prospects of joining the European Union. Europe is more than the EU and yet membership in the EU is for many countries an important goal, since our historical, cultural and geographic ties are unmistakable, as are our mutual political, security and economic interests.

With the overcoming of historical enmities after 1945, European integration brought about an unprecedented phase of peace and friendship, of economic strength and stability. Further, it led to the establishing of democratic structures and the rule of law.

The special value of this peaceful process of uniting has increasingly lost its fascination today and it is being questioned more critically than ever before. Some speak of a crisis of the European Union, some even of the threat to the process of European integration. At any rate, the break lines running through Europe are unmistakable: they are visible in the United Kingdom's leaving the EU, in the 'refugee crisis', in the argument about necessary EU reforms, in the reintroduction of border controls in the Schengen area, in social inequality, in the increase in authoritarian and illiberal policy - above all in central and eastern Europe - and in the resurgence of nationalism and populism.

Paradoxically, one of the reasons for the alienation of many citizens from the EU lies precisely in its success: for most people, life in peace today is so absolutely normal that Europe as a 'peace project' cannot develop any greater appeal or provide grounds for any more common interests.

Like many of you, I grew up with a grandfather who had been conscripted in two world wars and served as a soldier from start to finish. For me, as a child, he was a difficult and unapproachable person. Today I would say, as an adult, that he was a man deeply marked by all the years in the war and as a prisoner of war, wounded and scarred in body and soul.

Beside him was my grandmother, who was just as tough. She had raised their twelve children in these decades practically all by herself. As a memory of that time, I still have a postcard that my grandfather sent my grandmother during World War I. Sometimes I think that the collective memories of the past century have faded just as much as this postcard from the front. But it would probably be enough, in this assembly, to tell just a few of our family stories, in order to grasp that we again urgently need the attraction of Europe as a peace project!

But there are also more reasons to point to the weaknesses of European integration. Some of the EU's promises have remained unfulfilled, e.g. the promise of solidarity and the promise that our own children would be better off. For many, 'Europe' in the context of globalisation stands for a future in which a few become richer and richer while large parts of the population are hopelessly left behind. The economic and financial crisis did not only destroy trust in many member states – the impacts are tangible still today for EU citizens, above all in southern Europe. A particular problem in large parts of Europe is the high level of youth unemployment.

At the same time, Europe's reputation as a stronghold of human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality and respect for human rights is increasingly being tarnished. Proceedings are being initiated against EU member states for violating the principle of the rule of law, and no agreement can be reached about the distribution of refugees. The only common response to migration and refugee movements has been even higher and sharper barbed-wire fences at the European borders, and deals with questionable regimes. The EU as the sum of its member states is in danger of plunging into a crisis of credibility, both within its ranks, and to the rest of the world.

Yet there is also reason for optimism and confidence, since the EU's capacities for action are still extraordinarily diverse. Its great democratic, economic, social and political potential enable it to take responsibility for sustainable development, the protection of human rights, securing peace and preventing conflict, as well as dismantling social injustices. If the EU did not exist, it would have to be invented today. And I would add: if CEC did not exist, it would have to be invented today. Young people, in particular, greatly appreciate freedom of movement in Europe. They experience a Europe that enables encounter and exchange across national borders. Hence, turning to the top politicians represented here, I say that we in the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) take the view that Erasmus+ programme must be expanded in future and equipped with even more financial resources.

II. Biblical orientation

What is the response of the churches to the present situation? Very many churches have gathered in the Conference of European Churches and they certainly have differing opinions on Europe, the future course of the EU, dealing with refugees and understanding solidarity. That came out in the replies to CEC's Open Letter on the future of the EU. It is a great achievement of CEC to have enabled the myriad of church voices to be seen and heard. The whole process made clear that, while we as churches may have different ideas and demands, we want to take action for change together and to emphasise what unites us.

Why can we take joint action for change? And why must we?

This General Assembly is asking questions about our witness in Europe. As Christians we can testify to our experience with the faith that unites us. From the start, this faith has focused on the bonds between very different people and cultures. Crossing borders is an

early characteristic of Christianity. That does not go without tensions and conflicts, of course, and it requires a constant effort.

We see this in the response of early Christianity to tension and conflict. For example, Paul was confronted with a great argument in the Corinth congregation when it was at risk of breaking up into different factions. Each one stubbornly insisted on having a particularly valuable, different identity of its own.

What did Paul say in his first letter to the Corinthians? "Hold fast to one another."¹ (1 Cor 1:10). Although Paul himself is the object of hostile attacks, it is clear to him that they can only go forward together.

Paul's reason is that they are all equally called and elected. Writing to the Galatians he notes: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).

We can all bear witness to the fact that argument need not be at the expense of unity and that we can strengthen the ties that bind across borders.

Some may now object that these statements of Paul relate, in turn, to Christians who formed a separate group. That may be, but it would be short-sighted not to see its border-crossing character as such as a basic feature of Christianity. That is exactly what we can understand from the parable of the Good Samaritan, that Jesus tells in Luke 10 to explain the highest command of loving God and the neighbour. In the parable the Samaritan helps the man from Israel who has fallen by the wayside. Here too we are told about crossing the borders of nation and religion.

As Christians we can also testify to the links between people across borders. Our ecumenical bonds are part of this testimony. The *Charta Oecumenica* of 2001 can be read like a rewrite of Paul's challenge "hold on to one another". With its commitments to European integration and the reconciliation of peoples and cultures, to resolute opposition to nationalism and to respect for people of other faith, it unequivocally rejects exclusion, extremism and xenophobia. CEC offers us a framework for living out the message of the *Charta Oecumenica* in all our diversity and bearing witness to it together.

III. What does that mean in practice?

The debate that CEC launched amongst its members about the churches' views on the future of EU was an important initiative for clarifying the relevance of European integration for the individual churches and giving a voice to the different CEC members from East and West, North and South, Orthodox, Protestant or Anglican.

CEC's regional conferences and the responses to the Open Letter showed that the churches bring Christian orientation into the discourse and raise their voices for those who do not speak up because they have no lobby.

The great majority of Europeans belong to a religious community. Most of them are Christians. It corresponds to the European and Christian spirit to have the openness and self-confidence to cross borders. It is therefore intrinsic to the Christian religion to be a mainspring and source of commitment in Europe. Everyday Christians bear witness in practical action for refugees, in prayer for world peace and in ecumenical exchange across national borders. In so doing, they are journeying on the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace.

¹ Translator's note: This literal translation of the verse as quoted from the 'Luther 2017' Bible ("Haltet aneinander fest!") is used throughout this paper to give vigour to "be united" (NRSV).

Permit me at this point to make a few remarks about the Evangelical Church in Germany's positions and commitments in Europe. After all, one of the issues in this panel discussion is the Christian presence. The EKD is convinced that, alongside political parties, trade unions and civil society, churches and religious communities are expressly challenged to convey the idea of Europe. This is not only a matter of invoking cohesion in tones of pathos, but increasingly of making the EU and its relevance comprehensible in spite of all its imperfections.

Since 1990 the EKD has had a representation in Brussels. Many significant political decisions nowadays are taken there, not in national capitals alone. This office has a church mandate for public relations in Brussels and intervenes when questions concerning justice, peace and the integrity of creation come up at the EU level. Together with other church representations and faith-based organisations, not least with CEC, the office often brings church positions on issues related to peace, society, the environment, asylum and migration into the political dialogue and reflects European developments back into the EKD bodies.

In addition, I am – as EKD bishop for ecumenical relations – also responsible for the EKD's German-speaking ministries abroad. They are places of vibrant European community. Almost 120 pastors are currently working abroad on behalf of the EKD – in Europe and across the whole globe. Besides their commitment in the parishes of many European cities, they also contribute to a cultural exchange at the local level, organising encounter and exchange across linguistic and denominational borders.

The EKD's interest in Europe is also shown in the debates of our general synod. At its meeting in 2016 in Magdeburg the members of the EKD synod focused intensively on the future of the European Union and adopted a statement that met with a positive response in political circles.

Its heading is the phrase from Luke, "Do this, and you will live" (Lk 10:28). That is the promise to all who love God and their neighbours: "Do this, and you will live." That touches upon what the question about Europe's future is all about: How do we want to live? Will we hold fast to the (also Christian) values on which the European Union is founded – respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, human rights? What about European solidarity, between the member states and among the EU citizens?

The EKD synod sees many opportunities in a united Europe, and criticises the attitude of some member states that only support the European idea as long as it serves "national Interests". The statement particularly stresses the church's task of connecting people across borders. "Helping and protecting refugees and strangers" is also an "inalienable part of Christian life". Synod suggests that we need "a Europe-wide public debate about our common values and interests". Here it sees an important role for time-honoured ecumenical fellowships such as CEC, and likewise in partnerships existing between the churches ("twinnings"). It also expressly welcomes the initiative to hold a European Christian Convention.

The synod statement calls for safe, legal pathways for refugees into the EU; and a Europe with a social dimension. It welcomes the approach of the European Commission, via the European Pillar of Social Rights, to highlight the social dimension of the economic and monetary union (EMU) and comes out in favour of a "social governance" structure for EMU. EU institutions should also be made more operational and transparent, with broader democratic legitimisation of the European Parliament. Synod supports the EU as a peace project and also calls for a sustainable Europe, following the pattern of an "economy in the service of life".

The synod statement concludes with the appeal to encourage encounter in Europe. “Do not allow anyone to build fences and walls in your hearts and minds.” Policy-makers are called upon to give young people “fair chances to participate in working life and to help shape our common future”. Finally, the document recommends a joint dialogue on our future in Europe. “After all, Europe – that’s us.”

Accordingly, the statement must be understood as a reply to CEC’s Open Letter on the Future of Europe.

Allow me to conclude by underlining another point. From the Protestant point of view, and in the run-up to the European Parliament elections next year, it is particularly important to talk to people on the ground about Europe and not to leave important questions of the future to the politicians and experts in Brussels. People have to be involved in debates about future policy-making and be made to feel that they and their opinion are taken seriously. The EKD has on several occasions expressed support for citizens’ dialogues on the future of the EU. This topic was also included in the coalition agreement of the present German government.

Up until the European Parliament elections there will be a number public discussions, some co-hosted by Protestant regional churches (e.g. Württemberg, Berlin) and extensively publicised. In that context, the EKD has recently published ten proposals on the challenges of democracy. With this document² the EKD would like to spark lively, no-holds-barred dialogues on controversial political questions. Giving people the feeling that they are heard and noticed with their problems is a way of forestalling political apathy. In this context, parishes can become places of encounter and discussion across the barriers of opinion.

The core of the church’s message is, and must always remain: “Hold fast to one another.” There may be diversity and differing positions, but “Hold fast to one another.” After all, Europe – that’s us.

Thank you for your attention.

² Konsensus und Konflikt – Politik braucht Auseinandersetzung (consensus and conflict – politics needs debate).