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Summary Report of the Conference

ESSERE CHIESA INSIEME / UNITING IN DIVERSITY

Ciampino-Sassone 26-28 March 2004

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Uniting in Diversity

Summary report on the Conference "Essere Chiesa Insieme/Uniting in Diversity" (Ciampino-Sassone, Italy, 26-28 March 2004; jointly organized by the Federazione delle Chiese Evangeliche in Italia – FCEI – and the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe – CCME; funded by the EU-Commission)

"When I see an Italian singing beside me, a Ghanaian, I am certain, I know and I see the presence of God amongst us.

The subtitle of the conference states clearly what is at stake: "To be Church together among migrant churches and the churches in the receiving countries".

Italy was indeed a special place to host such a conference for the migration phenomenon is rather recent in Italy.¹ Having been an emigration country for many years it became an immigration country during the last 30 years. By now the issue is no longer a question of how to deal with newcomers, although this is always a burning issue.

In this context *culture* is of major importance for various reasons:

- Offering migrants the opportunity to maintain certain cultural traditions will facilitate their integration.
- On the contrary, the loss of cultural identity will actually make it more difficult for migrants to be open to new influences of the hosting society.
- Migrants also can "contribute very positively to the developing of new

cultural forms within the host society" (p. 83).

Religion, again, is a crucial aspect of this cultural concern:

- There is a need of migrants "to express their religious creeds as an instrument of stabilisation, avoiding marginalization and loss of values."²
- The host society as well as its churches may be enriched by the contributions of migrant churches.
- "A lively exchange in the field of religious communities between the hosting and the migrant society may prevent radical forms of fundamentalism abusing migrant religious communities" (p. 83).

The *experience of Italian Protestants* in this field deserves our special interest:

- Italian Protestants themselves are a minority within the Italian society.
- Today two-thirds of all Protestants in Italy are foreigners, while one-third are Italians.
- The Protestants in Italy could be "an interesting model for integration" (p. 116).

¹ A full report on the conference can be obtained at the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe, 174 r. Joseph II, B-1000 Bruxelles, info@ccme.be : Annemarie Dupré, Thorsten Leisser e Patrizia Tortora (ed.): Proceeding Documents of the Conference "Essere chiesa insieme/ "Uniting in Diversity". Ciampino-Sassone, 26-28 March 2004, Roma 2004. In this summary this document is referred to simply by quoting the relative page numbers. The motto cited is from the report p. 94

² The conference was considering mainly possible ties and relationships of groups and convictions belonging to the Christian family. But it is obvious that many of its findings would in a similar way apply to the "oikumene" of faiths as well.

- The Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy has therefore been launching the programme "Essere chiesa insieme (Uniting in Diversity)". For them, the Ciampino Conference was part of a long process of collaboration and communication with migrants. The member churches and their parishes have been involved for years in this process and thus in the preparation of the conference.

Models and traps

All European Churches have experienced a rise in communities founded by Christians from countries of the South. Often they have no established relationship to the wider community of churches in the host countries let alone the sense of sharing a common mission and, as Jean-Arnold de Clermont, President of *the Fédération Protestante de France* and one of the key speakers of the conference, portrayed it, they have often deplorably poor contacts: "I think as well of the Chinese or Korean communities who share places of worship with Protestant communities in their host countries and whose only contact with these communities is through using the same building, paying heating and lighting bills and the occasional bilingual worship service. What image of the church are we giving?" (p. 79).

The Ciampino Conference itself was an example of open communication between the two sides: mainline churches and "newcomers". It was possible to express fears and expectations and to pinpoint critical tendencies on both sides. The blame that churches in the host countries have to take, is obvious: Often they are involved with migrants only in diaconal work, leaving them alone as fellow believers and Christians. But isolation can also stem from the other side: While it was

clear that "migrants' churches"³ respond to a need and that they can be refuges in a world which rejects migrants, it was also said that Christian convictions as well as pragmatic reasons warn against a radical retreat into the refuge. Purely linguistic reasons "do not really suffice as a justification for the continuing autonomy", at least, "if these churches are explicitly part of a confession which already exists in the host country" (p.77). Moreover, new communities often form around pastors, "whose primary motivation is that of acquiring social status and financial resources" (p. 78). They prey – as de Clermont stated it - upon a clientele already vulnerable, thus becoming "traffickers in religion" for those who might beforehand have been trafficked as people.

Italy may yet be an example in another sense: Unlike in other countries of the West, migrants very often did not found their own communities but joined the local congregations. When new congregations were founded they often joined a member church of the Federation of Italian Protestant Churches. The large presence of migrants within local congregations today represents a major challenge to traditional identities and forces the churches to tackle the task of the *ecclesia semper reformanda* in new and hitherto unknown dimensions.

Religion – a tool for survival

In today's Europe many new immigrants live in very precarious conditions. As the doors of entry for most of them are practically closed, they realise daily how unwelcomed they are and quite often they are forced to survive as undocumented work-

³ Note that an adequate term is yet to be found. The members of Caribbean churches in the U.K. e.g. would not consider themselves as "migrants". They have lived in the U.K. for decades, often as British citizens. Thus their problem is the fact that this has not really been acknowledged so far, not even by the churches.

ers. Yet, how do these people manage to survive in such a hostile climate? For many immigrant communities religion is an important basis for community formation and integration. Though here, too, the dialectics of general politics makes itself felt: Indigenous European churches often tend to address these communities e.g. as African Christians, thus, stressing their ethnicity (and their otherness) whereas they themselves tend to underline what they have in common with their new habitat and call themselves e.g. an "international church" (Gerrie ter Haar, p. 40). As Christians, however, they are again faced with the otherness vis-à-vis the local church culture. The otherness in their religious life indeed is obvious and often puzzling for indigenous European Christians, for they have:

- an oral tradition of liturgy and a narrativeness of theology hardly known in Europe,
- a participatory character of services and of church life in general,
- an importance of dreams and visions and a specific understanding of the body-mind-relationship,
- an importance attached to healing through prayer,
- a belief in the actual presence and instrumentality of spiritual forces,
- a strong sense of evangelism and of a mission to be accomplished also among western "Christians".

While the influx of young Christian communities might be welcomed by an ageing western Christianity as a special kind of "replacing migration", the integration of this new momentum poses a number of challenges. They might be more easily accepted in fields where western churches have already diagnosed a specific want, e.g. for a more lively liturgy. On the other hand, they may be less welcome where

western Christians assume they represent a more "civilized" form of theology and ethics, e.g. with regard to a theological understanding of secularization or the ethical attitude to sexual minorities.

At the conference a series of six working groups looked into different fields of concern. They formulated their recommendations (pp. 92ff.) and pointed out specific challenges, some of which are listed here:

Liturgy and Music

- The presence of immigrants in our churches represents a challenge to re-discover the meaning of the service as a celebration, to place again in the centre of our liturgy a "theology of joy"; the service as a Messianic "wedding feast". Often, at the conference, it was said, that our services are, on the contrary, sad, like a long confession of sin in which the pronouncement of grace is however missing.
- A second challenge, which comes from the faith of immigrant brothers and sisters, is that of active participation in the service. In the moment of prayer these brothers and sisters display a strong participation, whilst sometimes one has the impression that our communities are in an almost "comatose" state. (On the other hand, it was observed, it is necessary to avoid making a spectacle of the service: The pastor must not become a "showman").
- African spirituality is expressed through the whole body (body language, images, music, and dance). To recover the use of the body in the service is a question of humility, it means, "letting ourselves go before God, stripping ourselves down before God just as David who danced before the Ark of the Lord" (p. 92). On the other hand, the movements of the body do not measure the presence of the Spirit,

and it is necessary to avoid exaggeration, respecting the way in which each person expresses his/her own spirituality.

- Our singing should be “ecumenically inclusive”, that is, both international and intergenerational. There is a need to “sing a new song” and not to fear changes and the positive “contamination” by other cultures.

Mission, Evangelism, Testimony

"The older churches see evangelisation as an announcement of the Gospel of Christ both inside the church and outside the church above all through the culture and presence in social activities, and through this they want to announce the great value of the Kingdom. However the churches born from immigration have a sharp sense of mission both through personal and public evangelisation through the announcement of Christ as Saviour of the world" (p. 93).

Both tasks can only be accomplished in common. The "newcomers" can "help foreign brothers and sisters to rediscover their new identity on the road to integration in a society which changes and in a church which takes conscientiously the constant call to continuous reformation" (p. 94).

Culture: Conflict and Dialogue

Christians from different cultural backgrounds living together may be led to reflect on their identities and even to develop new identities. From the discussion on the basic elements of every culture, it emerged that the conflicts arise easily in the face of symbols and rituals of the diverse cultures working together in the same space. Conflict is not necessarily a negative factor, but can be managed and led to a positive result, or one can learn to live with the successive conflicts that the

intercultural situation will cause in a given context.

The conflicts can be postponed or ignored, but this is never a solution. They can also be avoided, managed and resolved through continual communication meeting one another each time and discussing, speaking. It could be helpful to form a dialogue team of mixed composition, which accompanies, follows and helps in the solution of conflicts. It would also be helpful to prepare a manual with guidelines for the management and resolution of conflicts and for intercultural dialogue to be offered to the individual churches.

Reading the Bible

When we read the Bible together we must be aware of the fact that we have different backgrounds. Interpretation comes from conflict, as can be seen in the situations causing Paul to write his letters. Our communities are in similar situations. Different perspectives live close to each other because we are different groups and we have different stories and different social economic backgrounds (p. 96).

Reading the Bible together, too, happens in a context tainted with differences, but at the same time, it happens in the communion of the same church. These considerations, taken seriously, can serve as tools to both deepen our biblical understanding and our brother- and sisterhood.

Multicultural ministry

The ecumenical bodies should support churches to become “church together.” It is a sensitive and challenging process that offers big possibilities. There are needs to be seen and tasks to be accomplished at various levels (p. 97f).

At a local level...

- there is a need for exchange and sharing between host and migrant congregations about different possibilities of structuring church life;

- there is a need for adequate representation in decision-making structures;
- there is a need for space for migrant or ethnic communities to form their own worshipping community and reach a position of strength;
- learning processes should be two-sided;
- host churches should not be too formal about certification of membership;
- host churches should open-up the ecumenical scene/structures to migrant churches so that they do feel welcomed and thus not fall easily prey to fundamentalism.

At a national level churches should...

- make /maintain contact with churches in countries of origin of migrants in order to facilitate membership and recognition of congregations. This could be assisted by ecumenical bodies at European and global levels;
- take stock of what is there in terms of multicultural ministry;
- include multicultural ministry as an approach in theological formation;
- Promote the formation of leaders and laypersons from ethnic communities;
- provide mediation tools to prevent and resolve conflicts;
- look into church structures and determine whether they are hospitable, provide open space, and permit sharing of responsibility.

At European level churches should...

- share the current state of multicultural ministry at national levels;
- look into possibilities of mediation;
- create a mailing list/website and regular information bulletins to be shared

with contact persons in various countries and regions;

- define in churches and church bodies who will deal with multicultural ministry in order to be able to connect and share;
- continue frequent seminars/ conferences on the issues that are important in the European region. This ought to include the various existing networks of migrant churches;
- form a working group to look into the issue of church membership;
- revisit the recommendations of the third conference on migrant churches in European countries, Hamburg 2001: Many of the issues raised there are still relevant.

Education and training for minors

The conference insisted on the importance of education and training for minors (p. 98ff). European as well as migrant children may have problems and questions about diversity, which must be addressed. There is a creative sharing possible: The brothers and sisters from other countries are often young people who bring with them ways of expression which may be attractive to young people of the European churches.

- The spirituality of many foreign families encourages us to return to a way of living the faith that is less flattened by secularism.
- Today more than ever, the Sunday school needs to be lived in a holistic manner, with an awareness of the globality and complexity of the children's lives. It is therefore necessary to dedicate particular care to relationships with parents.

- The children are an integral part of the church and the service should give them visibility and space.
- It is necessary to watch that the separation of space between the Sunday school class and the place of worship does not also become symbolic, and to create for the children places in the liturgy during the service (for example: guardianship, where a member of the community is entrusted with responsibility for a child).
- It is important to involve Christian migrants as teachers in Sunday school and catechism.
- It is hoped that spontaneous exchanges of experience and material between teachers will increase, and more musical and didactic material will be produced that reflects the existing diversity.

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