

**Making Christ Dominant:
Reflections of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia
on the Programs and Activities of CEC
2009-2015-2029**

In a humble spirit of thanksgiving to the CEC member churches that share their resources and to our Lord Jesus Christ who unites us and through whom we are called in one hope, one baptism, and one faith, we have this privilege to present to the attention of other member churches of CEC our thoughts, reflections and suggestions for the Work Priorities of CEC 2009-2015 and the Visions of CEC 2029.

We are thankful to our sisters and brothers from the CEC constituency that has supported our participation in the activities of CEC for many years. This has allowed us to learn about the experiences, concerns, and views of other member churches. Although we are a small church from one of the smallest EU countries, through the Church and Society Commission of CEC we have also had the opportunity to express our views, to take part in shaping EU legislation, and to be heard on the issues that are of concern to the Council of Europe.

We welcome and appreciate the hard work of all Commissions and Working Groups between Trondheim and Lyon. We are thankful for the professional work of the staff of the CEC, especially for providing a way to share our opinions online and to reflect on the Work Programs and Visions of the Future of CEC.

We are called to one hope in Christ as His Church to fulfill His purpose today and in the future. In order to fulfill this calling, we urge that the focus be placed on spiritual issues that we believe would give us the answers to the problems that the world and European society experience today.

History

We were positively surprised to learn that the Russian Orthodox Church enjoyed CEC membership for several decades, even though they were under the same communist regime that we were. What a privilege and blessing for them! Unfortunately, we were able to participate in CEC activities only after the collapse of the Soviet empire. Most likely this is a major reason that we still find ourselves as the “newcomers” in the CEC family.

Within this context, we sometimes feel overwhelmed with the dominance of the “old” Western European Churches in CEC activities and programs. Certainly our size and newness to CEC have made it difficult to influence CEC’s decision-making process. We acknowledge that part of the problem has been an inability to communicate our views and suggestions at the right time, in the right way, and in the right place. Also, our relative lack of human and financial resources has made it difficult to participate to the extent we have desired.

Within these limitations, then, we humbly submit our reflections for your consideration.

Reflections on the Theme of the Assembly “Called to One Hope in Christ”

It is our understanding that our call to one hope in Christ consists of two parts—Christian unity/ecumenism and sharing hope in Christ with those who don’t know Jesus. We are very pleased about CEC being a bridge among different denominations and uniting west and east, south and north. This is a vital part of CEC’s role in the past, today and in the future.

Our concern is that CEC can become an instrument that deals only with political issues and social actions, that it can become much like a government agency, neglecting or even forgetting the purpose for which Christ has called us “out of the world,” while we are yet to function “in the world.” We believe that CEC must emphasize through its programs that salvation comes through Jesus Christ, that He is the only hope for the European region.

1. Christian Unity/Ecumenism

Charta Oecumenica provides a solid biblical base for ecumenical cooperation. We are thankful and pleased that CEC promotes ecumenical dialog and cooperation in Europe and beyond the EU borders.

Our ecumenical experience differs from that shared by western European countries. During the communist occupation of Latvia, ecumenical cooperation was vital for our survival. If different Christian groups had not supported each other, we would have been easier enemies of the godless communist regime. When Latvia became free from the Soviet tyranny, it was natural to continue to work with other churches in the same spirit of unity despite our differing theological views.

Although the issues are different today, only by working closely together can we unify our strength and become a powerful voice for justice and righteousness in society.

2. Sharing hope in Christ with those who don’t know Jesus

We believe that the only hope for our continent is salvation through Jesus Christ. We also believe that this is not true simply in some general sense, but that we are called to have a personal walk with Jesus Christ as our Lord. Unlike places such as India, in Europe, we do not have unreached people groups that have never heard about Christ (with the possible exception of Islamic immigrants). Everyone in Europe is familiar with Christianity, because this religion is a part of our culture. Most Europeans, however, know things *about* Christianity. The vital question is whether someone knows Jesus as their Savior.

Millions of Europeans have been baptized and have some loose affiliation with their country’s dominant churches. In some places, they pay a church tax through state

agencies. They might be on membership rolls in some local congregation, but they do not actively follow Christ. In our Church we call them “Lutherans on holiday.” The ultimate question is not church affiliation, whether active or passive, but do they know what it means to be a disciple of Jesus? Is Jesus their Lord, and do walk with him?

As we understand the teachings of Christ, the primary task of the Church is to proclaim Jesus as Lord and Savior, to make disciples of the nations. From our relationship with Jesus come good works, which is why social action and Diakonia are God-pleasing aspects of local, national, and international church bodies. To fulfill our calling, however, these actions must be rooted in and grow out of life with God through Jesus Christ.

Work Priorities 2009 – 2015

1. Freedom of Religion

We have a concern about encroachments on religious freedom. At the present, European legislation guarantees church sovereignty at the national level. We have begun to wonder if this will last.

In the context of globalization and European integration, we observe increasing pressure to take secularized views of the proper courses of action. It is vital to maintain the independence of church teachings and practice from the dictation of EU directives. CEC must take a strong stand to maintain religious freedom. The European churches, in whatever nation they are located, must be able to be free to preach the Good News of Jesus as they feel led and to practice their doctrines even though others disagree with them on some particular aspect, whether from a secular or religious basis. Despite what any EU directives or legislation may say, the churches must continue to have the right to apply their own moral standards, their own discipline, and their own employment practices. CEC must stand as a bulwark between the EU structures and religious freedom.

2. Ecumenical Cooperation in Europe

1. Collision of Views.

Ecumenical cooperation has come under pressure because of disagreements among the member churches of CEC on the following issues:

- Women’s ordination
- Human sexuality, including same-sex marriage
- The sanctity of life—euthanasia and abortion

Our observation is that these disagreements will not only continue, but if some churches try to impose their views on others, they will increase.

We follow the Scriptures that homosexuality is an abomination before God. The Church must be a light against this sinful practice. It is the Churches’ prophetic duty to warn people of their sins, to point to the need of repentance, and proclaim the forgiveness of

sins through the blood of Jesus. Those who refuse to repent should be free to live as full citizens without discrimination. Their lifestyle and social participation are entirely different matters than their spiritual condition before the Father.

The questions for the European churches that we would like to raise are--how do we maintain the prophetic voice, and how do we minister to those who would like to leave their sins and follow Jesus?

The churches that teach that homosexuality is an abomination before God will defend their views and practices in the European Court. For them, it is immoral to bless same-sex marriages. It is the same with those churches that believe that the ordination of women, euthanasia, and abortion are wrong. They will not approve such practices in their midst, nor will they allow their spiritual beliefs to be dictated by secular bodies.

In the midst of differing views and practices, CEC can perform a vital role. CEC can provide a forum for its member churches to share their views, to discuss their differences, and in a spirit of harmony—not of compromise—to find ways to maintain dialogue and a common ground for working together. Within this framework, the member churches—despite their differences of understanding the Scriptures and their contrary practices—can love one another and continue a united witness to Jesus as the only way to the Father.

2. Ecumenical cooperation with the Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church in Europe.

The Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church experiences a friendly relationship with the Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church in Europe, but we do not have close cooperation with them. Most of our contacts have involved consultations on Church and State relationship or social and ethical issues. After leaders of the Evangelical Lutheran Churches of Estonia and Latvia met with Walter Cardinal Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, regional theological dialog among these churches has begun.

With our conservative theological views concerning women's ordination, human sexuality, and the sanctity of life—euthanasia and abortion—we find a common theological ground with the Orthodox family within CEC. CEC can provide a forum where we can discuss these issues, although at present it seems to be politically incorrect to bring them up.

Ephesians 4:15 “Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him, who is the Head, that is, Christ”.

3. Cooperation with the Russian Orthodox Church

We share with our brothers and sisters from the Russian Orthodox Church a common history of persecution under the communist regime, an experience that can unite us and strengthen our ties and cooperation. Together, we can play a significant role in a process of reconciliation and peace in our region. We are thankful that CEC provides a platform

where we can continue to develop our relationship and heal the memories and hurts of the past.

3. Finances in Churches

We are accountable to our Lord Jesus Christ for how we use the material resources He has entrusted to us. We urge CEC to fund programs where the priority is to bring people to a personal relationship with Jesus and programs that develop that relationship.

4. Education

In our church, we are successful in transmitting theological knowledge to our clergy, but we find that we need more emphasis on our pastors' personal development and spiritual growth. Maybe other churches have the same need. If so, perhaps CEC could provide a platform for sharing the experiences of member churches.

Also, we need ecumenical training. We welcome and strongly support paragraph 6 in Work Priorities of the Churches in Dialogue Commission that CEC should provide the opportunity for improving ecumenical training and formation in Europe.

5. Care for God's Creation

We do not have programs and activities oriented towards the protection of the environment. Although we have not been involved in CEC activities in this area, we acknowledge our Christian responsibility as stewards of God's creation that He has entrusted us. Some of our Church representatives have had the privilege of participating in conferences related to the care of God's creation. We hope that through CEC we will learn more about how other member churches are approaching this responsibility.

6. Human Rights

The field of human rights is a strength of CEC, and in many ways we are satisfied and proud of this record. However, we would like to point out an extreme weakness. What more serious violation of human rights can there be than the murder of another human? It is our belief that killing babies in their mother's womb is the taking of human life. Birth does not make the baby a human—it only changes its location. To us, abortion is murder. We would appreciate it if this issue is discussed in CEC. Frankly, it is beyond our understanding how anyone can conceive of an unborn baby as not being a human.

A major question that we want to ask is: How can CEC help establish and promote the rights of unborn children? They cannot cry out on their own behalf.

7. Common Responsibility for the Mission in Europe

The Great Commission should become yardstick of all CEC programs.

CEC is strong on such programs as those that deal with social action—migration, EU legislation, climate change, etc. But the issue that should be running through all of our

programs of social action is this: How can we as an organization implement the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20, teaching salvation through Jesus?

1. Social action

CEC's activities that promote the general welfare of Europeans and others are good. We should take steps to ameliorate suffering and make life's burdens less onerous and more bearable. Anything that we can do to relieve poverty, reduce enmity, and produce more loving relationships reflects Jesus' love. Actions we take to help young people prepare for productive roles in society, to reduce the burdens of parents as they rear their children, and to ease the suffering of the sick and elderly also reflect Jesus' love. These are ways of fulfilling what Jesus told us to do--to use our resources to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and those in prison.

2. The Great Commission must become yardstick of all CEC programs

Through social action, we try to fulfill our calling "to love our neighbor." But is CEC promoting programs that expressly tell people that Jesus loves them that they need to repent of their sins and lead new lives? Do our programs make it evident that we are not acting on our own but on behalf of Jesus? If programs fail to do this, are they any more than social action programs performed by government agencies?

How is CEC fulfilling the Great Commission?

Matthew 28:18-20

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

The Great Commission has three elements:

- A. "Make disciples"
- B. "Baptize the disciples"
- C. "Teach the disciples"

How are these three items reflected/not reflected in the programs of CEC?

We suggest that the Great Commission should guide CEC. CEC's programs should be ways of sharing the hope of salvation in Christ with those who do not know Jesus. We also suggest that Churches in Dialogue Commission should make the Great Commission central in its Work Priorities.

8. Theology of Religions

A consultation process toward a "Common Theology of Religions in Europe" is a part of the Churches in Dialogue Commission Work Priorities 2009-2015. Indeed, by virtue of the co-presence of other religions on European soil, having a relationship with them is inevitable. We no longer, if we ever could, live in isolation from other religions. This is, of course, a pressing reality brought by the mass immigration of members of Islam.

What we must affirm in establishing “a possible common theological base” is the Kingship of Jesus, that He is the Christ, the anointed one, God’s only begotten Son, and that there is salvation only in Him. The Holy Spirit calls us out of the earthly Kingdom into God’s spiritual Kingdom. The spiritual Kingdom consists only of followers of Jesus. There are no second or third avenues to the Father. As Jesus said, “I am the Way and the Truth and the Life, and no one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Jesus could not be clearer about the way to the Father, and the affirmation of this truth must be central in our finding a “common theological base of religions in Europe”.

Freedom of religion means that all religious groups—Christian and non-Christian--have the right to practice their beliefs, including establishing their centers of worship. Freedom of religion and establishing cooperation with Islam or other non-Christian religions, however, does not mean to compromise this basic doctrine of the Kingship of Jesus as the exclusive way to the Father.

9. Economics and the Calling of the Church

There are many ideas and theories as to the cause of the global economic crisis we are facing. Economists will be analyzing our present crisis for generations. They will argue its causes with burning passion and be embroiled in severe disagreements, just as they have the Great Depression of the 1930s.

It is the same with the solutions to our economic crisis. There is no agreement among the financial experts, nor is there a lack of solutions being passionately argued as the vital courses of action that governments should take. In Europe and the United States, some economists argue that the government must bail out failing industries, subsidizing or even nationalizing them. Others, with equal vigor, argue that the government should reduce its involvement in failing industries and let market forces do their work. While most governments seem to be taking the course of bailing out failing companies, New Zealand is choosing an opposite approach. Determining that the enormous debts that these nations are taking on will burden future generations, leaders in New Zealand are going to lower taxes, reduce regulations, and cut government spending (Mary Kissel. “You Can’t Spend Your Way Out of the Crisis.” *Wall Street Journal*, March 7, 2009.)

With deep and widespread disagreement about causes and solutions of the global economic crisis and with rival arguments vigorously debated by economic specialists from economists to financiers, we humbly suggest that we stick to our specialty—sharing Christ.

It is easy to point a finger at any particular economic system—whether that be capitalism or socialism, and especially capitalism now that it is creaking and even crumbling—but in and of itself these systems are neither moral nor immoral. The immorality comes from the use to which an economic system is put. It is not that the system is corrupt: Rather, it is the politicians, the financiers, and others who misuse the economic system who are corrupt. Such corruption is always with us, making an utopia on earth impossible, for the corruption stems from original sin. These people, like us, are putting original sin into practice, an inevitable part of the human condition.

It is this corruption that Jesus came to cleanse through his blood, to wipe the slate clean with the Father. This is the Church's business, proclaiming the Good News—that the Father sent His only Son, that this Christ was crucified and came to life again, that Jesus has made it possible for us to have a personal relationship with the Father.

Our mission is not to redo economic structures. We need to concentrate on what our calling is--to proclaim the reconciliation of individuals with the Father through Jesus--and not get distracted from this calling with economics and politics. We dare not think that social actions, as good as they might be, are a substitute for proclaiming the Gospel of salvation.

The question, ultimately, then, is how CEC as an organization that has been given ample resources in terms of money, personnel, talent, and opportunity doing with this primary goal that Jesus has given us?

10. CEC and Migration

We are pleased that the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) is a part of CEC, as it has important work to do, especially with the vast migration to Europe from Islamic countries. As they do their work, we urge CCME to keep in mind the main business of the Church--people's spiritual condition, uniting them with the Father through Jesus.

Keeping this issue in mind, then, we need to ask: What is CCME doing about the spiritual condition of the migrants? What an opportunity to bring them the Good News!

It is not a question of the equality of religions. According to Jesus, there is only one way to the Father and that is through Him. Following the Great Commission, this must be our central message. Those who reject the message and want to maintain their non-Christian religions should find no discrimination in our society. They should be free to practice their religion. But this is not to acknowledge an equality of their religions regarding salvation.

Reflection on the Visions Into the Future 2029

Rebirth and Renewal of Christianity in Europe

Shine, Jesus, shine, fill this land with the Father's glory;
Blaze, Spirit, blaze, set our hearts on fire.
Flow river, flow, flood the nations with grace and mercy:
Send forth Your Word, Lord, and let there be light.
(Graham Kendrick)

The ten elements in our vision for the churches in Europe:

1. That the churches shall freely exercise their right to teach, preach, and function according to their sense of ethics.

We remember and appreciate our past. We have lived under communism, and we know what the price of freedom is. Therefore, we appreciate the work that CEC does through its Church and Society Commission on EU legislation in relation to religious freedom. This work must continue to ensure that churches can continue to exercise that freedom.

2. That *Charta Oecumenica* be studied, analyzed, and put into practice to fulfill the command of our Lord Jesus Christ to love one another.

3. That an ongoing prayer network be established among the churches.

4. That the churches of Europe be full of people of different ages, nationalities, and colors, and that there are many young families with children.

5. That the churches of Europe be filled with holy men and women praising the Lord with their holy hands lifted up in prayer, without anger or disputing (Tim. 2:8), caring for God's creation and sharing resources with one another.

6. That the churches of Europe be filled with children learning about the love of Jesus, surrendering themselves to our Lord.

7. That CEC helps to activate European youth so their hearts are on fire for Jesus and they are well equipped for enjoying and sharing the Good News of salvation and life in Jesus.

8. That CEC helps young men and women learn biblical principals of the family and parenting.

9. That CEC helps our deteriorating demographics by stopping abortion so unborn babies can leap with joy in their mother's womb, enjoying the right to live and not to be killed.

10. And, finally, and, especially, that the Great Commission be greatly reflected in all of CEC's activities, and that CEC's programs help develop churches without walls, open and inviting to all to experience Jesus, our only way and hope, baptizing in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit so that Europe can be filled with true followers and disciples of Jesus Christ.

How can CEC as an organization implement this vision? To do so, the vision must be reflected in CEC's activities and programs. We must formulate goals that are specific, measurable, and realistic. We believe that with God's help we can do this, and that then CEC can fulfill its historic opportunity and godly destiny.