



THE PORVOO COMMUNION OF CHURCHES

Communiqué

From the Porvoo consultation on

Identity, memory and hope: the continuing significance of reformations for our churches and societies.

Around 30 participants from 11 different Lutheran and Anglican churches met in Bergen, Norway, February 25 – 28, 2017 for a consultation of the Porvoo Communion of Churches. They gathered to reflect on the 500th anniversary year of the beginning of the Reformation, particularly timely in a world where churches are challenged to respond in love and peace to assert once more the message of hope in a troubled and troubling world. How we tell the history of the Reformation continues to shape the identity of our churches and our societies. The consultation considered some examples of that process and explored how fresh ways of remembering the past can open up new and hopeful ways of imagining the future, for our churches and our societies. The conference was co-hosted by the Anglican Chaplaincy in Norway and Church of Norway.

The opening presentation of the consultation from Revd Canon Dr Charlotte Methuen from the Scottish Episcopal Church explained the formation of new ‘confessional’ identities in Western Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and how they brought together a range of different factors from doctrine and liturgy to the layout of church buildings and methods of church administration. The linkage in some places between confessional and emerging national identities was noted, and in discussion participants explored how far these identities remained influential today, and how far they had weakened or been eclipsed by other forces shaping contemporary self-understanding.

Martin Luther is the decisive figure in the origin of the Reformation, so what is his continuing legacy for Christians today – not only Lutherans, but also Anglicans and more widely in other traditions? Revd Anne Burghardt, who is coordinating the anniversary activities and resources offered by the Lutheran World Federation, argued that there are two particular aspects of Luther’s work that have enduring significance for all the churches. The first is his understanding of God’s liberating grace: the good news of God’s unconditional love sets us free from self-absorption and the need to make ourselves worthy, so that we can seek the will of God and serve one another joyfully in love. The second aspect is Luther’s determination to make the word of God in Scripture available to all and his deep commitment to the educational work required for that to be a reality. Also, the translation of the Bible and the use of the vernacular in the liturgy enabled and accelerated the development of individual national languages. This theme has powerful resonance in societies where education is being geared more and more tightly to narrowly economic objectives, for the student who receives it and the society that support it.

Is the reform of the church something that only belongs to the past? The Revd Canon Dr Jeremy Worthen from the Church of England described four different phases in how reform has been understood in Western European Christianity. Commenting on the way that in the past century and a half, it has become a common term in more or less secular contexts, he proposed that churches needed to take care to ensure that their approach to reform was shaped by a theological framework drawing on the rich traditions we share in this area. Responses from participants indicated that reform indeed remains a widely influential category for many of the member churches of the Porvoo Communion, but also one that is bound up with forms of institutional change that may be controversial or resented. To what extent is our contemporary experience of church reform one that speaks of God's liberating grace?

When describing the good news they have to share, Christians characteristically speak of salvation, and it was over the meaning of salvation that Luther challenged so sharply the church leaders and teachers of his own time. But what might it mean in our contemporary societies to speak of the good news of salvation? What is it that we wish to be saved from? How may salvation be conceptualised beyond a Christian framework and how might interreligious connections contribute to the healing of the nations? A further question was raised: do we need to redefine sin as well as salvation? Prof Dr Marion Grau from the Norwegian School of Theology listed some of the 'signs of the times' for member churches of the Porvoo Communion, proposing that in order to respond they would need to draw on the full breadth of models and metaphors for understanding salvation in Christian tradition, including approaches that have been neglected or that arise from dialogue with new partners for the churches. Identity is flexible, rather than essentialist. Such an understanding of identity opens you up to engagement with the other who is already your neighbour.

The challenges that the churches are facing today were presented through four case studies. These, in addition to group work and exchange among participants, as well as related material, contributed to a consultation raising a rich range of themes from many contexts. Some of the insights shared were:

- How we receive our neighbour today

An important part of receiving our neighbour is the way we welcome strangers. A pressing issue is how we accommodate migrants in our societies, by including them into our church communities, or providing space for worship, and space for sharing. To be true to the reformation understanding of God's Grace, we need to be open to what others can provide us with. Openness to receive gifts from strangers, neighbours and migrants is challenging, in that we might have to learn anew, and to change our ways and habits. However, if we as church are not open to change our ways, the changing society we live in will not be able to relate seriously to the church.

- The use of language

We live in a time where the very concept of truth is questioned, and where people can refer to an individualized truth, or faith. In this context we need a faith language that can be understood in a wider society. This does not entail losing our inherited faith language, but challenges our habit of speaking a church language that may distance us from people seeking our community. Re-imagining the way we communicate, may be an enrichment to the way we express our faith in action. Finally, we must remember that hospitality implies listening and an invitation to active participation, as well as openness to the need for quiet participation.

- Consciousness about our privileged situation

Our churches live in welfare states. This entails the danger of becoming passive in more than one way. On the one hand, it is uncomfortable to face a potential situation where privileges might be taken away. It may be easier to conform to a religious majority situation where it suffices to culturally belong to the majority religion, even if it is being used to support nationalism and xenophobia.

On the other hand, even if we as churches want to be interactive and inclusive, a privileged situation might easily make us forget our own need for help and input. In turn, this may cause mistakes in our analysis of the situation of others. It may also cause us to actively organise people into groups in need instead of being truly inclusive to people. Finally, to overlook our own privileged situation, may make our message of hope irrelevant.

- Communicating a message of hope and community

How do we speak of faith and salvation today? This is not a question of giving up the core message of our Christian hope, although people may reject it. It is about allowing our neighbour to express what his or her own hopes are. If we revisit the richness of our own Christian tradition, we may find answers to the question of how we convey hope to people today. As the passion story of suffering and pain may respond to the suffering of people today, the Easter message of resurrection and new creation may convey hope. In the wealth of our tradition's imagery we may find images that can be understood and perceived today. In a similar way, the concept of God's gift of grace, as it was revisited throughout the reformation, may today respond to the inherited guilt, which for some people today leads to self-destruction or aggression. The church must convey the message of God's grace with care in a time of individualism, as grace is not a personal possession. The grace of God can be received in faith, but is not a matter of individual achievement. God's grace is a gift. This challenges our churches to be communities of faith and hope where this gift can be experienced.

The local contexts in which we worshipped contributed significantly to the consultation. The Sunday Eucharist was celebrated in the Bergen Cathedral, and the Opening and Closing worships, as well as morning and evening prayers, were held at St. Mary's Church, where we witnessed the partnership in mission between the Anglican chaplaincy in Norway and Church of Norway in Bergen. We also received and enjoyed the hospitality and companionship of the local church communities, and Bjørgvin diocese of the Church of Norway. In the midst of its surrounding nature, the interaction of art, history, religion and commerce in contemporary Bergen, was brought together in a walking tour led by the artist and philosopher, Mr Arne Magnar Rygg. The tour provided an opportunity to use many senses in perceiving what identity means, locally, and historically.

The Porvoo Communion of Churches is the result of an ecumenical agreement that brought together a wide range of Anglican and Lutheran Churches who have been sharing a common life in mission and service for the past 21 years. The vision of the Porvoo Common Statement is to be together in mission and ministry. Churches in Europe continue to seek membership of and to join Porvoo today.