

THE MEISSEN AGREEMENT

Bishop Jürgen Johannesgotter, Lutheran President of the Society, addressed the Annual Meeting on the topic 'Making Meissen Work'.

In 1991 the Meissen Agreement was signed in London and in Berlin. The Lutheran Bishop of Saxony Johannes Hempel preached in Westminster Abbey and Bishop David Tustin of Grimsby preached in Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedachtniskirche in Berlin. The first Iraq War just had begun and as the German President von Weizsacker was present there was a demonstration in church and David Tustin told me: He was surprised and did not know what would happen, but the demonstrators just read their resolution and then some of them stayed in the church and others left it. You see: Right from the beginning the Meissen Agreement started within the real existing world and the real existing Churches. What David Tustin said in "Gedachtniskirche" is true up to this day:

1. The Meissen Declaration is not only theoretical but also practical. It is based on the agreements as a result of the ecumenical dialogue between our churches. It is not just paper, but aims for concrete and practical consequences. The Meissen Declaration is supposed to be a contribution that not only bishops, but also Priests and Pastors and parishes in both countries come together and meet each other.
2. The Meissen Declaration is not a conclusion. It is an important step on this way. Other ecumenical dialogues are wanted beside this Declaration. They are part of the mutual ecumenical convergence of our time. The special importance of Meissen Declaration is that it is the first formal Agreement between British and German Churches.
3. From the beginning of this Declaration Meissen had to be considered in the context of a new Europe. Christian witness and Christian diaconia have been for centuries part of European culture. As citizens of a common Europe we have to give our spiritual contribution to the identity and to the cultural values of Europe within a world that needs reconciliation. In this respect Meissen has always been a spiritual and political contribution of our churches to the well being of this world.

The Meissen Declaration of 1991 was a conclusion which marked a beginning. The Church of England, the Evangelical Church in Germany, and the Federation of Evangelical Churches in the GDR made the declaration:

"We ... on the basis of our sharing the common apostolic faith and in the light of what we have rediscovered of our common history and heritage, commit ourselves to strive together for full, visible unity."

1. We acknowledge one another's churches as churches belonging to the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church of Jesus Christ and truly participating in the apostolic mission of the whole people of God;
2. We acknowledge that in our churches the Word of God is authentically preached and the sacraments of baptism and eucharist are duly administered;
3. We acknowledge one another's ordained ministries as given by God and instruments of his grace, and look forward to the time when the reconciliation of our churches makes possible the full interchangeability of ministers;
4. We acknowledge that personal and collegial oversight (episkope) is embodied and exercised in our churches in a variety of forms, Episcopal and non-Episcopal, as a visible sign of the Church's unity and continuity in apostolic life, mission and ministry.

We commit ourselves to share a common life and mission. We will take all possible steps to closer fellowship in as many areas of Christian life and witness as possible, so that all our members together may advance on the way to full, visible unity.

As the next steps we agree:

1. to continue official theological conversations between our churches, to encourage the reception of

- the theological consensus and convergence already achieved and to work to resolve the outstanding differences between us;
2. to establish forms of joint oversight so that our churches may regularly consult one another on significant matters of faith and order, life and work;
 3. to participate in one another's worship, including baptism, eucharist and ordinations;
 4. that authorised ministers of our churches may, subject to the regulations of the churches and within the limits of their competence, carry out the tasks of their own office in congregations of the other churches when requested;
 5. that the Church of England invites members of the member churches of the Federation of the Evangelical Churches in the German Democratic Republic and the member churches of the Evangelical Church in Germany to receive Holy Communion according to the order of the Church of England; the member churches of the Federation of the Evangelical Churches in the GDR and the member churches of the Evangelical Church in Germany invite members of the Church of England to receive Holy Communion according to their respective orders. We encourage the members of our churches to accept the Eucharistic hospitality extended to them and thus express their unity with one another in the One Body of Christ,
 6. that whenever in our churches the people of God assemble for Eucharistic worship, the ordained ministers of our churches, in accordance with their rules, may share in the celebration of the eucharist in a way which advances beyond mutual Eucharistic hospitality but which falls short of the full interchange ability of ministers. Such Eucharistic fellowship will reflect the presence of two or more churches expressing their unity in faith and baptism, and demonstrate that we are still striving towards making more visible the unity of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church and that we are strengthening and encouraging one another on the way to that goal in this Eucharistic fellowship with the One Lord Jesus Christ;
 7. that whenever a bishop or minister accepts an invitation to take part in an ordination of another church this expresses the commitment of our churches to the unity and apostolicity of the Church. Until we have a reconciled, common ministry such participation in ordination cannot involve acts which by word or gesture might imply that this already has been achieved.

And finally it is said: "The implementation of the proposals in this Declaration will mark an important stage in the growth towards full, visible unity of the Church. We know that beyond this commitment lies a move from recognition to the reconciliation of churches and ministries within the wider fellowship of the universal Church."

Two aspects are of great importance in this declaration:

1. There is a strong longing for unity; "ut unum sint" is present;
2. there is an Anglican and Lutheran soberness ("Nüchternheit") about what is possible and what is not yet possible, an awareness of what is still separating our churches. But the goal is present: "full, visible unity"!

Let me add something as somebody who was born at the end of World War II: This Declaration is a result of the ecumenical dialogue of those who have experienced World War II with the mountains of guilt and victims and shame about it - and the fierce determination: War shall no longer be justified by God's will! Meissen Declaration is a result of Coventry and Dresden - and those who learned from this experience. No theological arts and crafts, but "theologisches Schwarzbrot/ theological brown bread").

The Meissen Implementation Agreement provided that the Commission should towards the end of each five year period review the progress the churches have made during that period on the way to full, visible unity, and their fulfilment of the pledges they have made. The members of the Commission are appointed for five years, from 1991 - 1996, 1997 - 2001, 2002 - 2006, 2007 – 2011; six members on each side, two bishops as Co Chairmen and two co - secretaries. In addition representatives of the "Evangelische Synode Deutscher Sprache in Grossbritannien" (Pastor Wolfgang Kruse followed Pfarrer Christoph Hellmich), of the Celtic Churches, of the Anglican Episcopal Churches in Germany. The annual meetings of the full commission are held alternately in England and Germany, using the language of the host country. In addition the two commissions meet on their own about three times a year.

The partnerships (Local Ecumenical Partnerships) are an important part of the Meissen work, between deaneries, parishes, dioceses and Landeskirchen. These partnerships shall involve visits and exchanges of lay people and ministers. These links have proved to be a success story of the Meissen process. Over 30 partnerships are known to be flourishing, some of them with ministerial exchange.

In addition theological conferences are part of the Meissen process; the last one, the sixth, took place in Dusseldorf - Kaiserswerth in 2008 about "Ecumenical Understanding and the Authority and Uses of Scripture in the Context of the Meissen Agreement. Another one has been on our different understanding of Confirmation. (Einige ErHiuterungen)

This conference has been a very helpful one with the clarification of the differences and the chance to learn from each other. It would be fine if we achieved a mutual recognition of confirmation.

What I learned from the Meissen - Process

Ecumenical dialogue is a consequence of the Gospel, not only of our churches. For a long time we were mostly involved with the differences of past centuries and did not know enough about the challenges of the presence and each other today. Very often we create new differences instead of unity. What we need is a "realistic ecumenical dialogue" with much confidence in Jesus word "ut unum sint".