Anglican-Lutheran Society Conference in Hamburg

11th-15th September 2026

'A Changing Church in an Age of Migration'

Welcome to the Ökumenische Forum, HafenCity, Hamburg

Address given at our Conference Dinner in the Oekumenisches Hafenforum by the Rev Michael Stahl, Lead Pastor for Pastoral Care and Public Engagement

Bishop Paul Ferguson has invited me to tell you a little about the ecumenical location where we are meeting tonight. Since I know that brother Lesley Nathaniel is also here I can tell you that he would have more experience of what I am talking about! Another person here who is close to my heart is Kai Funkschmidt because he and I studied theology together here in the city and enjoyed the student life and the cultural life of the city. However, in those days this area where we are now was like a 'lost' area of Hamburg consisting of warehouses and containers within the customs-free zone. Forty years ago it was not an area you would like to visit! But the authorities here in Hamburg decided to redevelop the whole area and to start a project called 'Harbour City'. Now there are about 7000 apartments, 15,000 residents and about 45,000 working here. It's still not finished. New buildings are opening all the time and the University is moving into this area. There's a new commercial centre and it's become a very attractive place to visit. It's the place where the cruise ships come and there are many tourists.

The thinking behind the project was to bring together working, living and the cultural life. The citizens of Hamburg are particularly proud of the spectacular new Concert Hall where there is a wonderful viewing area on the top offering fantastic views especially at night.

So, what has all that to do with the ecumenical fellowship and the Churches? From the very beginning the Churches were very interested in the development wondering what the need might be for a Christian meeting place here. At the gateway to the new development is the beautiful church of St Katherine and that already testified to God's presence in this area. It is a Lutheran Church with a wide range of religious, musical and cultural life which attracts many people in the city and which is also a tourist highlight. Some felt with a church like that already here what was the need for another church presence, while others felt that in a new district like this there should be a quiet, peaceful place where people of different confessions and religions could find a place for contemplation and holiness as well as a place where sharing and solidarity would be possible, right in the heart of the new 'city'.

So, a project started. Seventeen churches and communities from all denominations came together and founded what they called 'The Bridge' (*Die Brücke*), The Ecumenical Forum in Hafen City. You can tell from the title that the idea was to bridge the different denominations and religious traditions. It wasn't just the Lutheran Church in North Germany, it was the Roman Catholics and all the churches in Hamburg including Mennonites, Baptists and the Anglicans. These different denominations came together to create a place where they could worship together, and this was something new for our Lutheran dominated city. Needless to say, not all Lutherans were in favour of the idea at the

beginning. To start such a project in a city with such a secular-oriented citizenship is something that the Churches wanted to do.

Ecumenical cooperation of this kind was inspired by the *Charta Oecumenica* of which I expect you have heard. This Charter is printed on the door of the chapel here in four languages and I hope you will all have a chance to see the chapel which tries to express the different traditions which we try to link in this project.

2012 marked a milestone in the history of the Hafencity with the completion and opening of this building. One of our larger Church institutions rent the rooms to the people who live here. Then, also in 2012, the large bell in the front of the building was rung at 6pm and continues to ring at that time to remind the local population that this is a Church place. For the opening the Bishops and the City Mayor were among those who celebrated the opening of the building and the start of all that is going on here.

At the same time an ecumenical group of about 50 members moved into some of the apartments here. This is a very important part of the whole concept, to bring a Christian community into the heart of the building. These members are quite active in keeping the aims in mind, organising events and projects, inviting people in and running the daily services in the chapel. So, it's a bit like a modern monastery.

One important concept in establishing the project was 'Fresh Expressions' of Church which we borrowed from you British folks. The idea is to reach out to people who do not belong to traditional churches. The hope was that the Ecumenical Forum would attract people who would not normally go to church; young people, local residents, tourists and visitors passing by. It's about reaching out with the message of the Gospel in this secularised environment and connecting with people in their search for meaning, community and spiritual fulfilment. I can tell you that our Ecumenical Forum has attracted considerable interest, not only in Hamburg but across Germany. We have many visitors from other towns and cities across our country. We serve Fairtrade coffee, which is what you are being offered now, People come here to meet, pray, discuss, share or simply sit together to eat or to talk. It also provides opportunities to discuss local issues and social concerns, We also use it as a forum for church conferences and meeting, to connect international communities and to strengthen the Church's inter-cultural development in our churches, and to enable inter-religious dialogue to take place.

I have many, many memories associated with these rooms, from private celebrations and board meetings. I particularly remember how in this very room we worked hard on a strategy for the North Church to reduce its CO_2 emissions to protect our planet and world.

The Ecumenical Farum, The Bridge, is now approaching its 25th year and the Churches can be proud of what has been achieved. Of course, I have to acknowledge that not all the hopes and expectations from the beginning have been fulfilled. Since the Covid19 pandemic the number of visitors has declined and it has proved harder than expected to engage young people and local residents on a lasting basis. It is also proving more difficult than was hoped to run the place economically. Many of those who

founded the project, among them Leslie Nathaniel here, moved away or retired, and it is increasingly difficult to find new people to take on the responsibility of the daily services and so on and so forth. Financing the rent of this building, including the personnel costs, is a considerable challenge for the Churches, especially at a time when the mainline Churches, Lutheran and Catholic, suffer from heavy losses in both membership and money. So, the member Churches have started an evaluation into the project and there is considerable debate as to how it can be carried forward into the future. Something that makes this centre so valuable is that it is a place that is constantly developing, changing and responding to the new challenges and searching for new ways of being Church. It shows that Christians from different traditions and cultures can share a common space, learn from one another and witness to their faith together.

The Ecumenical Forum is in many was a place that embodies the achievements and challenges of ecumenical coming together across denominational boundaries, the joy of trying something new, and the ongoing task of finding new ways of being the Church in a changing world. And that, I think, is what makes it so appropriate that have your final evening with us in this place – Lutherans and Anglicans coming from different traditions but sharing so much in faith and commitment to ecumenical fellowship. So once again I welcome you to Hamburg, the Gate to the World, as we say, and I wish us a wonderful evening and conversations, and a good last day of your conference,