



EVANGELISCHE KIRCHE
IN HESSEN UND NASSAU

Der Kirchenpräsident

Welcome address

to the International Partnership Consultation,
Centre for Ecumenical Work at Frankfurt, 03 – 07 Sept. 04

Prof. Dr. Dr. Peter Steinacker

Dear Sisters and brothers in Jesus Christ,

I would like to welcome you all warmly at the International Partnership Consultation here in Frankfurt. I am glad that you have come from all parts of the world to meet for a discussion about the religious and political situations in our countries, about the problems and challenges facing our churches, but also about the happy and blessed experiences gifted to us by our God.

It is a good thing after such a long period with intensive encounters between our churches and your congregations, that the Partnership will be evaluated in order to see what it has brought to all of us, for what we may be thankful, and what might and should be improved. I have visited nearly all of our partner churches at least once – I was not in Sumatra yet –, and every time I returned grateful, filled with good experiences and enriched. I am especially pleased that we managed in the last years to build-up really equal partnerships. Partnership means to meet each other on an equal basis, to mutually offer insights into the real situation of our churches in a sisterly openness, and to share joy and grief of the others, because we are living together in our Lord in a reconciled diversity. It is also a feature of partnership to grant each other the varying life situations, a different theology and piety, to learn from each other and to pray for one another. Partnership even means to help each other with delicacy but noticeably, if there has arisen a difficult situation, whatever this might be.

Since the beginning of our partnerships, our world has changed in an unforeseeable dimension – as regards economy, politics, sciences, technology, and even theology. Globalisation, the development of the communication media, have such a levelling power that deeply interferes into our national and ecclesiastical practices, into our values and traditions, and transforms us – whether we want it or not. Our youth does not simply grow up within our church life as in the past, but is rather given the choice of many different options of lifestyle, value orientations and desires. In some societies in our countries, family structures that so far had been a guaranty for social security, emotional warmth and church relationships, are now changing into communities chosen more or less loosely. Of course this implies as well an individual gain of freedom. The formerly imposed lifestyle has opened to the autonomy of self-determination, and this is also a high Christian good. Nonetheless, we are struggling to find a reasonable compensation that serves life – you in your countries no less than we in our country. It is very helpful then to talk to each other about concepts for solving this problem, and to learn from each other and encourage one another.

At present our country is going through a deep economic crisis. And our church as well. This is even necessary, if we want to be a lively people's church according to our claim. If the country is not in a good shape, the church can also not do fine. We are faced by a dramatic revolution in our social systems, what frightens many people. Insecurity about the future, fear of economic decline are part of the reasons why our economic development is stagnating and does not grow in a way as required for effectively fighting unemployment. Many persons

having enough money hold it back and don't return it into the economic circle, because they aren't sure about what will come. Fear and insecurity – this should really be the moment for a church that wants to stand at the side of the people. Perhaps you might find some time during the consultation to talk together over this question, since your churches have much more experience in tackling with economic crises than we have – we are grateful for your advice.

A profound transformation in our pluralistic society is the change in its religious sector. Some 20 years ago, the large majority of the people in our country were Christians, more or less related to the church, but Christians. By immigration, we are now living together with ca. 3 million Moslems from various faiths, and integration is not an easy thing, especially because we don't agree on concepts and goals of integration, neither in politics nor even in the church. It means a lot to all of us that we may live together in peace and in equality before the law, even for women and men. I may wish that you take the opportunity of this consultation to share experiences concerning this question of living together with other religions.

All of us, all religious people are faced by the problem of secularisation, i.e. by a development where increasingly more people want to live their private and public life without any religious reference. Many church governments in your countries but even here among us are concerned about this religious state. Nobody seems to know the right way. However, there are two ways that will miss the target of a lively church and will end up in a dead-end street: namely relativism and fundamentalism. Relativism tries to admit everything appearing religious without any criteria nor measures. This leads to a syncretism where everything is equally valid – but also unimportant. And this destroys faith and its core: Jesus Christ.

And indeed, fundamentalism is also destructive because it narrows the bible's wide perspective into a form of belief that excludes others, even condemns them as non-Christians. Coercion and subjection, blindness towards the variety of bible and life invade the faith that, according to the witness of the apostle Paul, is based on the freedom to which Christ has freed us (Gal. 5,1). If relativism considers nothing as really precious and holy, fundamentalism changes the religion of freedom into a religion of fear and coercion, a word being linked in the German language with the word for "narrowness".

Dear sisters and brothers,

I am concerned about the constant growth of violence for religious reasons in the world. I am not only talking of Islamic terrorism that presently radiates terror in Caucasus, that destabilizes the Holy Land, no less than the irreconcilable policy of the Israeli government, I am not only talking about the terror of September 11 and in the Iraq, but I also talk of the policy of violence held by the Bush administration and motivated religiously. In reaction to the terror of September 11, an unprecedented restriction of civil freedoms has totally changed the once freest country on the earth. Since I was young, I had ever admired the democratic force of the U.S.A., and I would never have dreamt that this country once would keep people for months and years in jail without a court sentence, that torture might be considered a permissible treating method on prisoners, and that warmongering can be motivated by religion.

Let us work together for that the strength of our faith may transform itself into the service for peace – even into the peace of God that is above our reason.

You are most welcome, may God bless your consultations.