

The Christian Century

European institutions "more open than ever" to church co-operation

May 31, 2011 by [Jonathan Luxmoore](#)

Warsaw, Poland (ENInews)--A senior ecumenist has welcomed growing co-operation between leaders of European institutions and churches, and predicted a growing advisory role for religious communities.

"I think we're seeing a greater openness today than ever before," said Rudiger Noll, director of the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches (CEC). "Our latest meeting was triggered by the Arab uprisings and European response, and by Europe's financial and economic crisis, and in both areas the institution presidents were very clear. What's needed is a new value-based, community approach in Europe, rather than just an economic system. They're turning to the churches for this."

The United Church of Westphalia pastor was speaking after a Brussels meeting on 30 May between 20 religious leaders and the Portuguese president of the European Union's governing commission, Jose Manuel Barroso, as well as the European Council's Belgian president, Herman van Rompuy, and the Polish president of the European Parliament, Jerzy Buzek.

In an ENInews interview on 30 May, he said religious leaders now had regular "institutionalized meetings" with senior European officials, including the EU's rotating presidency, and "dialogue seminars" on issues of common concern, in line with Article 17 of the EU's 2008 Lisbon Treaty, which guarantees churches an "open, transparent and regular dialogue" with EU institutions. However, he added that church leaders also hoped to strengthen the structural contacts with a "deeper culture of dialogue."

"EU leaders have said they didn't need the Lisbon Treaty to have a relationship with us," said Noll, whose organization, founded in 1959,

groups 125 Orthodox, Protestant, Anglican and Old Catholic churches, and 40 associated organizations.

"Although it would be naive to believe all our member-churches speak the same language, we should at least singing, at the end of the day, from the same hymn sheet - playing different instruments, but making up a single orchestra."

In his address to the annual meeting, the religious leaders' seventh with European institution presidents, CEC's Orthodox president, Metropolitan Emmanuel of France, said the world of faith could "prove a powerful ally in efforts to address issues of democratic rights and liberties."

A 30 May CEC press release said the mostly Orthodox and Protestant representatives had reiterated their commitment to promote "the rights of minorities and migrants, economic justice, participation, solidarity, freedom of speech and expression as well as religious freedom."

The meeting followed a 25-28 May annual plenary of CEC's Church and Society Commission in Brussels, which was attended by religious affairs specialists from the EU's European External Action Service, Bureau of European Policy Advisors and European Parliament presidency.

A 27 May CEC statement said the commission had agreed to finalize a human rights training manual for European churches and join the Sunday Alliance network, adding that member-churches were committed to operating as "responsible and competent partners for the European institutions," while seeking to "speak with a common voice and make sure this voice is heard."

The inclusion of the Church and Society Commission on a new EU Transparency Register, requiring companies and organizations lobbying the EU to have their activities publicly recorded, would "allow for regular and non-bureaucratic exchanges to complement the formal dialogue process," the statement said.

In his ENI interview, Rudiger Noll said the current openness to churches and faiths was a "common sentiment among EU officials," but added that CEC also counted on the appointment of a "permanent facilitator" in the 736-seat European Parliament, to ensure dialogue was maintained during an upcoming change of leadership from the center-right European People's Party to the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats.

"When it comes to relations with the institutions, the churches are always surprised to see how much they have in common--the context in which we live is much more important than any theological or confessional divergences," the CEC Commission director told ENInews.