



Herausgegeben
von der Pressestelle
Der Evangelische
Kirche in Deutschland (EKD)
Herrenhäuser Str. 12
30419 Hannover
Tel.: (0511) 2796-268/269/265/267
Fax: (0511) 2796-777

Translated from German

For a Common Future in a United Europe A Statement by the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) on Strengthening European Cohesion

On the morning of 12 October 2012 the Nobel Committee in Oslo, the capital of Norway, announced the Nobel Peace Prize laureate for this year. The central historical significance of the European Union as a peace project was thereby honoured by this eminent institution.

The award by the Nobel Committee is of great symbolic significance, particularly at a time when the struggle to resolve the debt and financial market crisis is threatening to overshadow the idea of Europe. The issue has long since been more than a question of maintaining the common currency in the euro zone. What is at stake now is the future of the European idea, an idea that has endowed Europe in the last few decades with peace, growth and welfare, and a growing degree of social justice. Yet the citizens are uncertain and many of those speaking up see only one solution: exiting the single currency and returning to the nation state. Young people, in particular, are suffering from a lack of prospects due to the grim labour market situation in many European states, and are rebelling against the injustice. Often the national austerity efforts are deepening the gulf between rich and poor. Anger and frustration about those in government often discharges itself onto the least privileged in society: refugees and migrants. Furthermore, there is rising inequality and increasing tensions among the states. Old resentments are becoming acceptable again, nationalist forces are gaining ground. Even governments from the political centre increasingly count the cost of the European Union (EU): is the commitment to Europe still worth it?

Community in Europe has a value far exceeding the common currency. A disintegration of the euro zone could cost us dearly: besides high economic burdens, there would be a dramatic rise in unemployment figures, according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO). The resultant distortions in societies and among states could dash all hopes for a common path out of the crisis. Indeed, they could destroy the values that constitute Europe and are embodied in the European Union: peace, well-being and justice. Membership in the European Union has its price. But Europe, above all, is of great value.

Unity in diversity

The crisis and integration of Europe directly affect the churches. The vision of “reconciled diversity” can help the churches, and not only the churches, to shape cohesion despite all differences. The experience of ecumenism has led us to a common mission in the world. We work for a political order in which diversity and respect for different identities is experienced as a strong point. In such a political order solidarity would be experienced as an enriching process of participation and not felt to be a one-way street. We recognize the tensions and conflicts that accompany diversity, from our own experience as churches. At the same time, however, we live from the certainty that unity in diversity can succeed if we focus on common concerns and leave space for differences. Traditional and often obsolete barriers can be overcome through humility and modesty. Confessions and cultures, convictions and nations form a framework for our experiences and define our perspectives. However, they will not prevent us from continually seeking for common, central ground, and for common goals. How a community can grow together in diversity has been shown by the Protestant churches in Europe. That is symbolized by the Leuenberg Agreement (1973) and the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe, and also by the Charta Oecumenica (2001). In our view, these documents also represent a sign of hope for Europe.

Together we are stronger

The EU of the 27 states is united, fortunately for it: not under a central power but in free self-determination of its peoples and states. Yet trying to communicate European policies to the member states is complicated. Although the Brussels decisions affect all citizens, Europe seems far away, the legislative procedures bureaucratic and complex, sometimes over-regulated and hard to elucidate. Hence people fear that a further enlargement of the EU will disconnect them from important political decisions. We see the dangers of this alienation with concern. Despite all the setbacks, the union of European peoples has proved itself.

In the globalised world, even the big European states are too small to be able to influence developments regarding the economy, and environmental sustainability. In view of economic interconnections with all its dependences, we need the European Union in order to be able to influence the general parameters according to our ideas and values. For foreign policy, and policies concerning the climate, environment, energy and development, the motto is: there's strength in unity.

Thanks to our long ecumenical experience with the global networks, we as churches are aware of the following fact. Only a united Europe can preserve its economic, above all political influence and effectively stand up for human rights and human dignity, and for a democratic, ecological and social market economy.

Subsidiarity – enacting responsibility at all levels

In view of global challenges, national responses are no longer enough. For that reason we need a strong Europe – as an open civil society, as a community based on political values and also as an economic area. That does not mean that all questions will have to be answered together in future. A deepening of the community will only succeed, when decisions in the sensitive areas of national identity, e.g. in cultural and social policy, are left at the national level, and social differences are respected. A Europe of freedom also lives from the responsibility of its member states for a sustainable budgetary policy and just social systems. Local action and local responsibility must be strengthened. That is where citizens have the most effective opportunities to play an active role, and here they can best identify with policy-making and experience Europe in different encounters and regional partnerships. A clear separation of decision-making powers at the national and European level will make it easier for citizens to attribute policy decisions to the right actors. Of necessity, the direct participation of all citizens also has its limits in reality. It is only in a developed system of representative democracy that citizens can successfully engage in necessary participation and identify with European policy. By contrast, prematurely shifting a maximum of decision-making powers onto the EU may alienate citizens from European policy and thus from Europe.

The crisis also offers an opportunity to readjust European decision-making mechanisms. Not everything needs to be settled in Brussels but what is decided there requires democratic legitimation.

A Europe of the citizens: strengthening democracy

500 million citizens live together in the European Union – in peace, freedom and relative prosperity. This is a great asset. Hence the churches strongly press for this order to be further developed in the spirit of a democratic community. The crisis has shown that the functioning of the EU urgently needs improvement. It is not the task of the churches to outline a future scenario for a new European constitution. It has to be said, however, that amending the European treaties will be unavoidable in the long term, on the road towards a genuine political union. That would entail a policy debate about the future of the European project, a debate which must involve the citizens. However, the existing potential of the treaties must first be fully exploited so as to make the EU institutions more operational and deepen the democratic legitimation of European decisions by the European Parliament, e.g. through endowing it with its own right of initiative. It is also important to associate national parliaments more with European debates and to intensify the exchange between national parliamentary bodies and the European Parliament. Creating or strengthening a European public in the member countries is a difficult, but important assignment.

Solidarity – renewing the promise

The European Union is a promise. This promise goes far beyond the preserving of economic prosperity and is only really recognizable in competition with other models of society and national economies. Europe stands for a life in peace and freedom, for open borders, for human rights, equality of opportunity and social responsibility, for democracy, the rule of law and separation of powers. Europe is, however, also the promise of being able to trust that the members of the community will support one another in a time of crisis. All of that cannot be taken for granted.

The founding fathers' vision of a united Europe must prove itself in a crisis. The community of European nations is based not just on mutual advantage and strengthening the economic area in times of forced globalization, but also on the readiness to show respect and mutual solidarity. If this hope is disappointed, trust in the European community will erode. Here we must not lose sight of the fact that solidarity and subsidiarity go hand in hand. The mutual solidarity that the peoples of Europe show one another stems equally from the support they can give each other in crisis situations, and from the responsibility of every nation to ensure the prosperity and welfare of its own people. The churches in Germany experienced this, and the way in which these two things belong together, in their own post-war history.

For a Europe with a social dimension

The growth of social inequalities and tensions in Europe may unleash a dangerous dynamic similar to the exacerbation of economic imbalances between the states. Nationally and internationally, the costs of the crisis should, above all, be paid by those most well-off. The costs should not be initially covered by reducing social benefits and then mainly offloaded onto following generations. That includes the challenge to shape, and if necessary reform, the structure of welfare states so that they remain crisis-resistant in view of demographic change. Despite all warnings by the churches since the international financial market crisis of 2008, it seems at present that the opposite is the case. The tax-payers of the coming generations will have to stand surety for the bail-out packages. This is particularly hard for young people, with their lack of employment prospects, but also those who have fallen into poverty and lost their jobs. A further group of concern is the people who are ill or disabled and no longer receive the necessary care. Fundamental freedoms and social human rights belong together.

The churches have the responsibility to shape the European Union in its social and solidarity dimension. To that end, Europe as a solidarity-based community must sharpen its social contours. But also in the individual economies, the well-off are called upon to bridge the gap between the economic and political in-groups and those who are excluded. If those with political responsibility do not succeed in balancing economic freedom and social

responsibility along the lines of the “social market economy” the citizens will lose their trust in a democratic and social Europe. The rising Euro-scepticism of German citizens about the constantly growing financial rescue programs (EFSF and ESM) shows the need for clear, far-sighted perspectives reaching beyond the day. The anti-European reflex that is feeding on the experience of social injustice in the countries receiving assistance is perhaps the greatest threat to the European project. People, and not markets, must be the focus of policy-making. In order to implement that, the globalised elites have a special responsibility; people who have lived in different contexts in their private and professional lives can build bridges and show the way forward not only in their nations and cultures but also between the cultures. Europe is not just an economic area but also a habitat, a place where people live. A further regulation of the financial industry is therefore urgently needed; the introduction of a financial transaction tax in some EU member states could be the first step.

Recalling and devising new ecumenical departures

The history of Europe is marked by wars, conflicts and profound mutual injuries. However, Europe also has an exemplary history of reconciliation, which is closely linked with forgiveness and the many different peace projects that churches experienced after World War II and granted one another. Examples are the Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948, Action Reconciliation – Service for Peace in Germany or the statement of the German and Polish Bishops’ Conference of 1972. We also recall the patient and stubborn work of the Conference of European Churches and the ecumenical assemblies as part of the conciliar process for justice, peace and the integrity of creation in Stuttgart, Dresden and Basel – they all contributed in their own way to making the Iron Curtain permeable and ultimately to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Giving a soul to Europe means confronting the wounds of the past but also not denying the multiple tensions, fractures and hurts of our day. Places for salutary, shared remembrance and solidarity-based projects that overcome inequality – all these open the way out of a one-sided construal of memory in national cultures and towards reconciled diversity.

(Faith) community without borders

The continent of Europe has been especially moulded by Christianity. As churches and Christians we are committed to standing up for European cohesion. The reason is that our faith and our fellowship know no bounds; peace, justice and care for creation are concerns that do not end at national borders.

The European Community is committed to these goals at the political level. We therefore regard the European Union as an important instrument for striving to implement them. Our future lies in God’s hand. At the same time, we have the mission to help shape it in Christian

discipleship. The future of a free, democratic and social Europe is worth our effort – not only as citizens of Europe, but also as Christian churches. Keeping in mind its underlying standards, in the struggle for unity in diversity, in ecumenical exchange and in civil society partnerships we want to do our part in the future development of the continent and its political order. We call upon other groups in civil society to do their part. Europe offers many opportunities for its citizens to enjoy a good future and, furthermore, to work worldwide for human rights, religious freedom, democracy and a socially acceptable and environmentally sustainable form of economics. Aware of the limits to financial and, in particular, natural resources we call, above all, for a stronger sense of solidarity – between the countries and peoples of Europe, but also with our neighbours, be they near or far.

Making Europe our own cause

It is time for us to activate the power of our common faith. The process of European integration, which practising Christians played a large part in devising, must remain fit for the future. The churches – precisely in their ecumenical bonds – have the strength and breadth to encourage people to take a common European path. They have the inspiration to live out the European ideas. And they have the experience to illustrate in practice the potential significance of international understanding, unity in diversity and common action across borders.

In the EKD we want to shape Europe together with other churches and religious communities so that it is and remains “our” Europe, a Europe of all citizens, a Europe with whose policies we can identify. We want to participate in shaping it – not only through our member states and the elections to the European Parliament, but directly as Christian citizens, in our associations and congregations, in social initiatives, ecumenical partnerships and cooperation projects, as Christians with our action and our prayers. We already experience Europe in many ways, from a congregational exchange to cooperation in European ecumenical institutions. That is the future: living Europe, so that Europe can live!

Hanover, 18 October 2012