

Call for papers

Being Church together

50th anniversary of the Leuenberg Agreement – consequences, realities and possibilities

***Academic conference to mark 50 years of the Leuenberg Agreement
Debrecen, Hungary, 9–11 March 2023***

To mark the passing of 50 years since the signing of the Agreement between the Reformation Churches in Europe – known as the Leuenberg Agreement for short, which acts as the basis for the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) – and as part of the series of events celebrating this anniversary, an international academic symposium is to be conducted at the Reformed Theological University of Debrecen (Hungary) from 9 to 11 March 2023. This symposium will offer a special opportunity to reflect critically and constructively upon the relevance of the Leuenberg Agreement and the results of the ensuing common theological work process. The focus will be on the contemporary significance of the realisation of common church existence launched by the Leuenberg Agreement and the question as to how this might and must be shaped in the future.

According to the Leuenberg Agreement and the CPCE, church unity cannot aim for uniformity or homogeneity. The Church as the body of Jesus Christ manifests itself in a diverse unity between the various limbs under the one head, Jesus Christ, and in the complementary nature of the various gifts through the one Holy Spirit. It is no coincidence that in order to express the dynamics of this diverse unity, the term “church fellowship” came into focus in the Leuenberg Agreement and the findings of the doctrinal conversations *The Church of Jesus Christ* (1994) and *Church Communion* (2018). The term expresses the basic theological insight that the CPCE is about neither separate nor fused churches, but rather a communion of churches that can maintain their legal independence, their rich liturgical, spiritual and cultural heritage, but at the same time be deeply connected and interdependent in being Church. In this togetherness and being there for one another, as a communion in witness and service in the world, as a communion in teaching and learning, in shaping and continuing to develop their common structures, in common ecumenical commitment, but above all in common worship, they win a share in the unity and catholicity of the Church of Jesus Christ and present this in a tangible form.

The anniversary of the Leuenberg Agreement gives occasion to reflect upon the consequences, realisation and possibilities of the Agreement and the CPCE from different vantage points determined by different theological and other academic disciplines, and church, ecumenical and social settings throughout Europe. Problems and challenges that hinder the life and intensification of the church communion and threaten to question its relevance require special attention, further elucidation and sensibility for viable new solutions.

Proposals (including ones that incorporate other perspectives) are invited particularly, but not exclusively, on the following topics:

- Trinity and church (communion)

In the light of not only ecumenical experience, the theology of the Leuenberg Agreement is occasionally viewed as lacking in trinitarian theology or as being narrow in Christological terms. The findings of the doctrinal conversation that received the strongest response after the Leuenberg Agreement – *“The Church of Jesus Christ. The Contribution of the Reformation towards Ecumenical Dialogue on Church Unity”* – in its trinitarian theological argumentation claims to explicate the theology of the Leuenberg Agreement, and the study *“Protestant Perspectives on Religious Plurality in Europe”* (2018), for example, operates upon a trinitarian theological foundation. What status and what meaning does trinitarian thinking have in the CPCE’s common theological efforts? Whether, and in what ways, should discussions focusing on trinitarian talk be intensified in the hope of opening up new horizons? Is it perhaps necessary to modify and extend the allegedly one-sided, dominant theological perspective on Christology towards pneumatology in order to arrive at an ecclesiology that deepens the concept of communion / church communion and is open to discussion with additional churches (e.g. Orthodox or Pentecostal churches)?

Potential topics:

- *Trinitarian foundation of the Church*
- *Ecclesiology and pneumatology*
- *Church and justification ...*

- Realising church communion in shared aspects of church life

The Leuenberg Agreement differentiates between declaring and realising church communion. Realising church communion makes church unity tangible as unity in Christ. This is experienced as communion in worship, as communion of witness and service, as communion in doctrine, as communion that is evolving in shape, as common ecumenical effort. How are these dimensions realised, and what questions does the CPCE face in this regard? How is the CPCE church communion embodied and experienced in the individual churches / in specific regions of Europe? What positive sources of inspiration and processes warrant special attention, reflection, and elaboration in this respect? In ratifying the doctrinal conversation *Church Communion* (see section III), the General Assembly in Basle noted that the key terms commitment, reception and catholicity encapsulate the challenges faced by the CPCE in realising church communion. How could they be specified more precisely today? How should we react to them? What is necessary and possible, but might also give cause for concern, with regard to strengthening and intensifying the CPCE?

Potential topics:

- *Worship as the basic form of church communion*
- *Function and relevance of the regional groups*
- *Significance of welfare and social work in the CPCE as fellowship of witness and service*
- *Realising the CPCE in the life of the member church X*
- *Emergence and/or constitution of regional groups in the CPCE ...*

- Ecumenical dimension of church communion

The Leuenberg Agreement has become an instrument for conveying mutual recognition between the churches and for starting to be Church together. The self-perception of the Leuenberg Agreement and the CPCE has from the start been set within the broader ecumenical movement and commitment. How the Leuenberg Agreement came about is communicated through the ecumenical confessional and

multilateral world communions. Particularly during the past three decades, the CPCE has developed its ecumenical responsibility towards different denominational traditions, but also towards, for example, multilateral collaborative organs of the churches in Europe (CEC). This enhances the realisation of church unity according to the CPCE's model of church communion with analogue developments between Lutheran and Reformed churches on other continents, but to some extent also with Anglicans. The findings of the CPCE's doctrinal conversation on "*Ministry, Ordination, Episkopé*" (2018) is an example of further elucidation of the question that has become a stumbling block in some ecumenical contexts. The expectation is that proposals for papers for this conference will examine the theological-dogmatic aspects and problems, but also other issues, in the ecumenical dimension of the CPCE, interpret its current status, and propose and substantiate further steps forward.

Potential topics:

- *Ecumenical responsibility of the CPCE*
- *Effect of the CPCE on shaping the member churches' ecumenical relations*
- *"Unity in reconciled diversity" in and between the churches*
- *Migration churches and new challenges for the church communion*
- *Eucharistic hospitality and table fellowship*
- *Categorising the CPCE's ecumenical dialogues*
- *Relationship between different church communions ...*

Biblical hermeneutics and church communion

On the basis of "*sola scriptura*", the Reformation churches declare that recognising the message of salvation from Jesus as Christ requires no additional written sources. However, there are differences in how the Bible is understood and interpreted, both within individual churches and between our churches and confessional traditions. Hence the Leuenberg Agreement already cites "*hermeneutical questions concerning the understanding of scripture, confession of faith and Church*" as one of the subjects that requires further work (LA, 39). However, the Bible not only serves the purpose of identifying the Good News. It is the basis upon which Christians and churches form their common will in theological and ethical matters. Churches who consider it essential to strictly equate the traditional text of the Bible and the Word of God that remains valid tend towards forms of lawful preaching, which runs the risk of contradicting the essence of the Gospel. Different interpretations of the Bible therefore lead to the adoption of conflicting ethical stances. If specific points in the Bible are handled eclectically, this can distort its message and hinder ecumenical dialogue or the discussion of biblical ethics. At the same time, more than a few doubt that we can gain orientation for contemporary issues in life from the texts of this ancient Book. Many churches feel challenged by breaking tradition in a way that strikes at the very heart of a church's self-perception based on the Bible. In its doctrinal conversation "*Scripture – Confession – Church*" (2012), the CPCE ratified a fundamental text representing a form of scriptural hermeneutics that clarifies the authority of the Bible and the orientation that it provides.

Potential topics:

- *Theory and practice – using the Bible and doctrine of the Holy Scripture*
- *Does interpreting the Scripture divide or unite churches?*
- *How the Bible and confessional documents relate to one another*

- Church communion in the face of ethical differences

The Leuenberg Agreement identifies the point of origin of the unity of the church in celebrating the Gospel in word and sacrament, such that the Gospel itself creates the common understanding of the Gospel. Many differences on ethical issues and in the member churches of the CPCE can be perceived as legitimate diversity. Some of these sorts of challenges stem from different historical experiences and cultural influences. Occasionally, they develop a dynamic that threatens to impede church communion or even shatter it. The question of the relationship between the ethical stances and decisions adopted by the individual member churches regards legitimate diversity or separating divergence in a church communion. It can come about that the joy of experiencing communion and common service and witness can be heavily encumbered by an ethical decision made by one church that is unacceptable to the other. What are we to make of the fact that churches who have reached a common understanding of the Gospel can differ so greatly in their perception of ethical issues? How significantly do the churches' different life circumstances affect their ethical perception and responsibility? What spiritual and theological resources should be sought and what instruments should be worked on to enable us to continue sharing our lives as a church communion in the face of divergencies that have in fact a dividing effect? What guiding ethical judgement is possible and appropriate for the CPCE on the basis of shared fundamental theological and hermeneutical insights? Notable examples are the CPCE's guides on reproductive medicine and end-of-life arrangements.

Potential topics:

- *Churches' ethical responsibility in different contexts*
- *Ethical differences in the churches and within the church communion*
- *Joint theological work as a contribution towards dealing with differences that threaten communion ...*

- Church communion under circumstances of different social experiences and realities

The German term "Gemeinschaft" in the context of "church communion" causes some problems, as highlighted by the different possibilities for translating it into English, for example (*fellowship, community, communion*). After investigating this thoroughly from a theological perspective, and taking into consideration how its use has developed in other international ecumenical contexts, the CPCE describes itself in English as a *communion* or *church communion*. However, the concept of communion is relatively new in European culture. It refers to the phenomenon of the need for a society to organise itself. In political and social life, many factors can form the normative conditions for organising a communion, such as common language and culture, common past, economic interests and political aims. This kind of self-organisation can have positive effects. However, it can also be used for ideological purposes or lead to conflicts, as demonstrated by a series of historical examples. Churches were and are also not immune to ideologised nationalism that places its own people over others. How do the European Protestant churches handle the different, often difficult historical experience with the phenomenon of communion, which can stretch as far as populism? Do the different social experiences influence the extent of commitment and its limits within the CPCE, and if so, how? Proposals are expected to focus on the effect or interaction within the communion, as experienced and perceived in different societies and social correlations, and the church communion, as experienced in faith and expressed in theological terms (most recently in "*Church Communion*", 2018).

Potential topics:

- *Risks and opportunities presented by the pluriform social influence of talking about church communion*
- *Commitment within the church communion ...*
- *The document “Church – People – State – Nation” (LT 7) and its meaning today*
- *Nationalism as a challenge for churches*

- The potential for reconciliation provided by the Leuenberg model for life in churches and societies

What meaning can the Leuenberg model of church unity have for socio-political life in Europe and beyond? The public-political culture nowadays is fraught with extreme divisions in many places, in which individual opinions claim absolute rights and seek to impose them in an atmosphere almost resembling a religious war. Dialogue between churches and political decision-makers, theological experts and representatives of political institutions at local, national and international level is more vital than before. However, the Leuenberg model of “unity in reconciled diversity” addresses the possibility of collaboration and communion without those involved having to relinquish their identity. It’s about insight into the significance of self-withdrawal for one’s own identity and into the need to think through one’s own position. It’s about having the humility to learn and transform through meticulous study and discussion. The Leuenberg Agreement and the fifty years of the CPCE’s existence show how obstacles to common service can be removed, even if the past and present are beleaguered with conflict and reliant upon reconciliation. So what is the socio-ethical relevance of the Leuenberg model? Can inspiration be drawn from the experience of being Church together in the CPCE for shaping our life as a society, and where can the Leuenberg model be subjected to criticism according to findings in social science with regard to reconciliation processes? Are there openings for critical dialogue addressing differences between the social and theological understanding of reconciliation? To what extent can the CPCE’s more recent efforts towards a public theology and a theology of diaspora be considered groundbreaking, and where should they go from here?

Potential topics:

- *Church witness in society*
- *Church life and civil society*
- *The socio-ethical contribution made by the CPCE for European societies*
- *Significance of the Leuenberg Agreement for public life*
- *Public theology and theology of diaspora ...*

We look forward to receiving your proposals for presentations and workshops. The conference will be conducted in German and English.

Workshops are intended to allow researchers to present their own work or to try out new approaches together. We invite you to submit proposals for workshops lasting either 45 or 90 minutes in any area related to the conference topics. Workshops may address one or more topics, but they should be organised under a unified theme. The structure of workshops is not fixed, and proposers may design theirs as they think best. We particularly encourage proposals for highly **interactive and collaborative workshops**, rather than panels with traditional paper presentations.