

Anglican-Lutheran Society

Annual General Meeting 25th February 2017

The Outworking of the Meissen Agreement from a German and Lutheran point of view

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Dear members and guests of this AGM of the ALS, brothers and sisters!

It all began on March 18, 1988; the Church of England, the Federation of Evangelical Churches in the German Democratic Republic (DDR), and the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) published a United Declaration in Meissen. One of the participants, Maria Herrbruck, called the publication a “historical moment in the church.” And she was right. On January 29, 1991 the Meissen Declaration, which was officially accepted by all of the participating churches, was signed in a church service in Westminster Abbey. Since then one of the official goals of the declaration – to strive together for full, visible unity of our churches – has been achieved on many levels.

The Meissen Declaration has sustainably influenced ecumenical development in Europe and beyond. It is a great success. Because of the Declaration German Evangelical Christians have been welcome guests to the Anglican Eucharist and correspondingly Anglican brothers and sisters at EKD communion services as well. The Meissen Declaration has deepened the relationship and increased the interchange of experiences between the EKD and the Church of England. Such a close relationship among partners of different denominations is unique to this day.

Most English dioceses and EKD district churches keep in contact with at least one similar partner. Common theological conferences, visits from delegations of church leaders and above all the lively exchange between congregations, choirs, schools and youth programs all characterize the partnership. Innumerable services have been celebrated together. There is hardly one synod of the EKD or of the Church of England in which there is not at least one visitor from the partner country. For years the German Protestant *Kirchentag* has had Meissen – services and Marketplace stalls that convey the Meissen story.

Germany and England have wrestled bitterly with each other during the two world wars in the twentieth century. Today, however, many friendships have been developed between the two countries. All the meetings of the Meissen partnerships have been characterized by profound hospitality. One example of this new and deep friendship is the partnership between the Frauenkirche in Dresden and Coventry Cathedral. Both ruins were once only warning – memorials of the horror that was experienced. The Church of England and the EKD live reconciliation. They understand each other as part of that one holy catholic and apostolic church that has come to us in Jesus Christ.

On behalf of the Church of England and the EKD the Meissen Commission coordinates the manifold relationships between dioceses and district churches. Five English and five German members work in his commission under the direction of the two co – chairmen Nick Baines, Bishop of the Bradford Diocese, and Ralf Meister, *Landesbischof* of the Evangelical – Lutheran Church of Hanover, the deepening of this relationship is encouraged. At the yearly conferences which take place alternately in England and Germany the Meissen Commissions plans further steps to full visible church unity. In addition, the Meissen Commission discusses other important developments within the district churches in Germany and England and oversees the implantation of the Meissen Declaration by developing guidelines and recommendations for this purpose. Furthermore, for the Church of England and its dioceses as well as for the EKD and its district churches the members of the commission are contact persons so that the Meissen Declaration can touch with the hearts and minds of people in a diversity of regions and congregations building a confident church in a pluralistic Europe.

The ecumenical movement is founded on the work of pioneers who do not shy away from extraordinary efforts, give authentic accounts of their experiences, and inspire others to commit themselves to ecumenical renewal. Dr Mary Tanner of the Church of England (whom we will listen to this afternoon) is certainly one of these pioneers of the ecumenical movement. On the German side two persons have to be mentioned: Dr Christa Gregel of the former Federation of Evangelical Churches In the GDR and *Oberkirchenrat* Klaus Kremkau of the Evangelical Church in Germany. The three of them were commissioned by their churches to participate in the deliberations held in the cathedral city of Meissen on the Elbe River, and contributed greatly to the success of the Meissen Declaration. All three are what we call in German “*Zeitzeugen*”, contemporary witnesses of the process. They did the “groundwork” for the leading clergy. Their contributions give us insight into the perspectives of the participating churches. They should not be read as one reads the three synoptic gospels, but rather, they show how ecumenical conversations served to forge a single, common position, the Meissen Declaration, from three different church positions.

Urged on by their determination to achieve the greatest possible degree of unity between churches which had been separated by theological positions, but also by the political division of Europe into East and West and by Germany’s division into two states, these pioneers coordinated the discussions. With great theological sensitivity and strategic vision for the ecumenical achievements possible, they did the groundwork. They facilitated the acceptance of the Declaration by the Synods of the Church of England and the Evangelical Church in Germany, their dioceses and regional churches.

Even if 25 years later we have not yet achieved full church communion, our regional churches, dioceses and congregations have been enriched and changed by the diverse and indispensable experiences of fellowship we have shared. Therefore the Meissen Declaration must be considered much more than a dynamic prelude to what proved to be a great ecumenical moment for the church. It is more than a declaration of intent or an enthusiastic ecumenical vision. Rather, as we rejoice over the communion already achieved and continue in gratitude to God, the MD encourages us to overcome the remaining obstacles. This is done for example by working towards a shared understanding of the episcopal office, an understanding able to bear close examination with the help of the Bible and our respective

confessional traditions. In accordance with the Meissen Declaration, we “*look forward to the time when the reconciliation of our churches*” is achieved (Meissen Declaration A (iii)).

Thus the Meissen Commission, the Theological Conference and the meetings of the delegations of both churches work for and encourage the partnership commitments to the already existing communion in listening to, understanding and applying the Word of God in the world, and to fellowship in the Lord’s Supper (MD, B (iii)). In view of the ecumenical practise already established, the Meissen fellowship refuses to follow any tendencies or attempts to itself become part of a new ecumenical ice age. This renders it particularly important in the present times and could inspire other ecumenical relationships.

Another remarkable aspect of the Meissen Declaration’s reception history is the fact that it has not only brought together Anglicans in England and Evangelical Christians in Germany. Rather its contribution to the reconciliation process between the British and Germans, for example by remembering the wars and their victims, cannot be overrated. The names of Coventry and Dresden stand for this reconciliation process. 70 years ago Germans and British were embroiled in a most deadly war. Through the wounds inflicted then we were in dire need of reconciliation. Today the Church of England and the Evangelical Church in Germany are living this reconciliation. Much of what seemed unthinkable has now become natural in our fellowship. Due to their diversity, the range of topics we discussed in the Meissen Commission is not easily surveyed. Therefore it is good to remind oneself of its beginnings, and to preserve and build on what has already been achieved. For the unity we have needs to be reclaimed time and again. This is the only way we can develop it.

Allow me to add a personal experience to this process. I have been the German co – chair of the Meissen Commission, 2002 to 2009, most of the time together with Bishop Michael Bourke from Wolverhampton, and at the end together with Bishop Nicholas Baines from Bradford. According to what the Meissen Declaration intended right from the beginning “On the way to visible unity” we chose the theological topics according to the questions: What hinders full visible unity? Is it church dividing or not? At the end of each 5 Years turn of the commission’s work a report was written according to the main themes, activities (partnerships, Local ecumenical partnerships, theological conferences, delegation visits, participation at the General Synod of the Church of England and the synod of the EKD, observers from other churches, presence at the *Kirchentag*. During these years you invited me to the AGM of the Anglican – Lutheran Society. That was the beginning of my friendship to the ALS. And I am very happy about it. Ecumenism is not the privilege of theological experts who write difficult books (understood only by few people). Ecumenism has a spiritual aspect which leads to prayer, adoration, service, Eucharist, and longing for unity. Spiritual ecumenism is not something instead of theological discourse, but something in addition.

The questions of our churches are not the same they were 25 years ago, yet the process to reconciliation and more visible unity among Christians (as thousands of young people last year were asking for at the meeting of the movement “Together for Europe”: “500 years of separation are enough!”) remain challenging for all of us. Not only in times of “Brexit” we need this longing and striving for unity as the good shepherd proclaimed in the Gospel of St. John, chapter 17, vv. 20-21.