

## **Inter-Church Work in the Evangelical-Reformed Church of the Canton of Zurich**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

It's an honour and a pleasure to me to share with you our ecumenical and inter-church work in the Evangelical-Reformed Church in the Canton of Zurich.

My name is Bettina Lichtler, I'm a pastor in the Evangelical-Reformed Church, but at the moment I'm not working in a parish but as the Coordinator of Ecumenical Relations of our Church. In this function, I prepared and supported most of the ecumenical events at this gathering together with Stefan Gisiger, Carolina Manghieri and others. And I think, this is a good moment to thank you, Stefan, and Carolina, Elijah Brown and all of you deeply for this moving and enriching ecumenical experience.

Our inter-church Work in Zurich is very rich, but it wasn't always like this.

### **Looking back to history**

The rediscovery of the Word of God 500 years ago here in Zurich provoked tensions - with the existing church, but also among the discoverers themselves: What exactly does the Word of God say? The Bible says this Word in many voices from different times. Which voice is most important? What does the Word of God say about our concrete situation? And was everything that has been sacred to the Church for centuries really wrong?

New answers to these questions were found during the Reformation. Many people were enthusiastic about it, others saw it as a threat and fought against it. And the reformers did not agree among themselves.

In the Reformed Church of Zurich we follow the principles laid down by the reformer Ulrich Zwingli and his successor, Heinrich Bullinger 500 years ago. Both have tried to give effect to the Word of God by cooperating with the state. They needed the city council of Zurich as a supporting power in order to have a chance against the overpowering Church of that time. Zwingli and Bullinger refused the consequent ideas of the Anabaptists because in their eyes the Anabaptists threatened the state order. The current Catholic Church doctrine and all its customs were sharply criticized and fought against by the Reformers. When it came to the point if the Reformation will persist or disappear, there was no space for ecumenism. There were tensions, disputes, violence, wars - because of the Word of God and the true faith. The Reformation of Zwingli and Bullinger finally won in Zurich and enforced their understanding of true faith in the state.

For centuries there was no room for people of other faiths in Zurich. Anabaptists were driven out. Catholics were banished from Zurich, later tolerated but often despised and demonised. In the neighbouring Catholic cantons the situation was exactly the same, only vice versa. Older people in Switzerland can still tell how they suffered when they married a spouse to the

other confession, or when they lived in a canton as a minority. Also religious Bible groups and preachers were in Zurich considered dangerous, radical sects.

As the powerful man of the 19th century, Napoleon was also dominating Switzerland. He gave Switzerland a new constitution establishing religious freedom. With the industrialisation, people left their homeland in search of work - regardless of canton or denomination. More and more Catholics, more and more couples of mixed denominations, also lived in Zurich. The conflict between the different denominations turned into a coexistence and finally into a togetherness. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Reformed Church even campaigned for the Catholic Church in the Canton of Zurich to receive the same state recognition as the Reformed Church has had since it was founded in Zurich. The homogeneity in the denomination was overrun by the mobility of the people and led to the fact that we had to learn to deal with diversity.

The external conditions have therefore changed, but there has also been a theological rethink: Enlightenment impulses, the Vaticanum II and a moving together of churches against war, persecution and oppression strengthened ecumenical openness to each other in the face of global challenges, especially in the 20th century. The Bible already makes it clear to us that putting the divine revelation in human words we receive manifold approaches to the truth. None of us has the one truth itself or can express it in human words; we are all seekers, on the way to the truth. Or as the Apostle Paul says (1 Cor 13:9-10): *For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.*

The worldwide ecumenical effort has also found increasing support in the Reformed Church in Zurich. Our present Church Constitution of the Reformed Church of the Canton of Zurich states: *Art. 12.1 The confession to Jesus Christ commits to ecumenism.* And: *Art. 163.3: The parish council... is jointly responsible for the cultivation and promotion of relations in ecumenism and with other denominations.*

## **Ecumenism with the Roman Catholic Church**

Today, we work particularly closely with the Roman Catholic Church because it is the church with most members we have by our side in Zurich. In all cities and regions in the Canton of Zurich, you'll find a reformed parish and a catholic parsonage. Several common ecumenical worship services take place in all parishes each year, for example during the Unity Week. Church Events for children, adolescents, adults and seniors are often held ecumenically by both churches, even Bible Studies. People who live together should also be able to experience church life together. Catholic and Reformed relief agencies are also active together in worldwide diaconal work and developing campaigns in Switzerland that are ecumenically implemented in the parishes with services, bazaars, lunches and actions. The pastoral care in hospitals and care centers, emergency pastoral care, pastoral care in prisons and much more is naturally implemented in ecumenical teams and supported by both Churches. Other examples for ecumenical projects and offers are the Church at the main railway station and at the airport, counselling centers for couples, young people and families, for asylum seekers and the unemployed. The Catholic Church and the Reformed Church in the Canton of Zurich have also issued joint public statements on some current issues in politics and society – last year for example in the context of a plebiscite about cutting public social assistance money for refugees.

On the Catholic side, theological questions cannot be decided in Zurich, but only in Rome. In Zurich it is therefore a matter of recognizing this diversity of faith, explaining and understanding the differences as far as possible, finding ways of living together (for example in mixed-denominational marriages and families) and realize as many concrete things together as possible.

## **Ecumenism with other churches**

The other churches in the canton of Zurich are much smaller. At the local level, common services, events and projects also take place here, depending on which churches are present and how openly they treat inter-church work. Some Reformed congregations have joined forces with Free Churches to form the Swiss Evangelical Alliance in which joint projects are pursued. Not all Reformed congregations and not all Free Churches are equally open to this cooperation, but there are strong efforts to build bridges and keep approaching each other. At the same time, clichés have to be overcome from time to time, for example that the evangelical Free Churches are overbearing like sects, or that people in the Reformed Church have no real faith at all.

Our new ecumenical partners are the Migration Churches. People are still becoming more mobile, coming from different countries to our Canton and bringing their beliefs, their traditions. More and more people from Southern and Eastern Europe and Africa are here who are connected to the Orthodox faith tradition and Church. The Orthodox Churches give people here a home and help them to arrive. They need room and church buildings to meet and to celebrate and they are looking for public recognition. Therefore, 11 Orthodox Churches have formed an association in Zurich. The Catholic and Reformed Church mediate rooms to celebrate, advise the association and hold joint celebrations once or twice a year. In theological questions, the situation is similar to the Catholic Church: Traditions play an important role for the Orthodox Churches; the theological lines are given by the patriarchates and can locally only be explained but cannot be widely discussed or changed.

Evangelical and Protestant Christians from all continents also come to Zurich and found their own Migration Churches. In order to facilitate their arrival, we founded a few years ago in Zurich a center for Evangelical Migration Churches, with rooms to be located and a coordinator pastor who mediates the dialogue between the churches among themselves and with the Reformed Church. Rev. Dinah Hess is presenting just now this work in the Commission on Mission of the BWA. In cooperation with other cantons, a Certificate of Advanced Studies Course in Intercultural Theology was also established, in which people from Migration Churches and people from the Reformed Church study together and get to know the theology of others better. In this setting, real ecumenical dialogue is happening.

## **The Zurich Church Council and the Charta Oecumenica**

The Zurich Church Council (AGCK Zürich) is a local representation of the World Council of Churches and of the Swiss Council of Churches. It exists in the canton of Zurich for over 50 years. In this council all the churches I have just mentioned come together. We maintain dialogue, ensure that the churches know more about each other and we organize lectures and panel discussions in which common issues and controversies can be discussed – as far

as possible. A great deal of trust has grown in this community in recent years, so you can count on support and understanding. Our cooperation is based on the Charta Oecumenica – guidelines elaborated by the Conference of European Churches – CEC and the Council of European Bishops – CCEE; it was signed in 2001. Here some of the commitments of the Charta Oecumenica: *We commit ourselves to act together at all levels of church life wherever conditions permit...; to defend the rights of minorities and to help reduce misunderstandings and prejudices between majority and minority churches in our countries....to continue in conscientious, intensive dialogue at different levels between our churches...*

### **Ecumenical events**

The largest ecumenical event in Zurich every year is the Way of the Cross on Good Friday. Churches of all denominations walk through Zurich, stopping at various stations, remembering the passion of Jesus Christ praying and combining the biblical texts with current topics. This year more than 1000 people took part.

Looking back, 500 years ago, the Reformation broke churches apart and led to much conflicts and suffering and war. To commemorate these 500 years, we are trying to do things differently today and we have integrated some ecumenical projects into our celebrations: An impressive act of reconciliation took place with the Anabaptists in 2004. And at various events and podiums of our celebrations these years, the Mennonites are naturally present as representatives of another Reformation that also began 500 years ago. Together with the Roman Catholic Church and the Church Council, we celebrate the Reformation memorial service in Zurich ecumenically. And we will make visible our joint social commitment on an open day at 20 institutions in September. The Zurich Church Council organized in 2017 an ecumenical panel debate about “Do all churches need Re-Formation”? With Free Churches and the Catholic Church, there is happening just now for 5 days a big church event in our Canton remembering the Reformation. A joint service is also planned with the Evangelical Migration Churches.

So I hope we have learned to live ecumenism as a way to see our own voice as a contribution to the diversity of voices preaching God's Word. We maintain our reformed identity and we make our voice heard, but we also try to have open ears for the other voices and the truth they are bringing.

Let us speak as often as possible as a common voice into the society and to get out of talking into action together. United in Christ – Transformed by the Word of God.

Thank You.

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(Input at the Commission on Baptist Heritage and Identity  
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