

New life in Christ

Prague VI, Strasbourg, February 11-15 2000

[Introduction](#)

[Common understandings](#)

[Open questions](#)

[The future?](#)

Introduction

Seeking unity through focused and informed dialogue has been a *Leitmotif* of modern ecumenical endeavour since the World Missionary Conference of 1910. This has also characterized a series of international and interdenominational conferences since 1986 known informally as The Prague Consultations.

The formal title of this year's meeting held in Strasbourg, 11-15 February 2000 is "A Consultation on the First, Radical, and Second Reformations," thus using language that requires some definition. The term "First Reformation" includes the Waldensian Church, the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, the Moravian Church (Unitas Fratrum), and the Hussite Church, all understanding their spiritual origin as having occurred before 1500. In this context, "Radical Reformation" refers to the Mennonites, Hutterian Brethren, Friends, and the Church of the Brethren (together often known as the Historic Peace Churches). The phrase "Second Reformation" designates the classical Protestant (Magisterial) Reformation, including the Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican communions.

This consultation is the latest in a series that began in Prague in January 1986. In that year representatives of the Historic Peace Churches met with representatives of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, the Moravian Church, and the Hussite Church to identify common concerns. The intent of the gathering was to seek a more unified and hence more effective engagement in ecumenical conversations. The warm communality there found was deepened in June 1987 in a consultation focused on "Eschatology and Social Transformation." "Prague III," held in June 1989, studied "Christian Faith and Economics." Common commitments made there have influenced wider circles, especially the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (Warc).

The next meeting, held in late 1994, was known as "Prague IV," although its locale shifted to Geneva under the sponsorship of the Warc, with assistance from the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the Mennonite World Conference (WMC). Its theme, "Toward a Renewed Dialogue," signaled a broadening of discussion partners to include Lutherans and Reformed, along with members of the Baptist, Methodist, Roman Catholic

Churches. Special attention was given to different perspectives on the Sermon on the Mount.

Geneva was again the site of "Prague V" in February 1998. This meeting continued to expand the range of those involved in the consultations by incorporating church leaders from Asia and Africa, facilitated through joint sponsorship by Warc, LWF, and MWC. Its theme, "Justification and Sanctification," reflected recent Lutheran-Reformed discussions as well as the then-current Lutheran-Catholic negotiations on the same subject.

"Prague VI" has continued the same discussion theme by considering aspects of that theological complex left open at the previous meeting. The phrasing of this year's title - "New Life in Christ" - also indicates that justification-sanctification language had not reflected customary usage of some consultation members. Participants were further concerned with the linkage of ecclesiology and ethics to salvation, as well as with analyzing its connections with ecology and creation. Finally, we addressed the question of a more comprehensive understanding of the concept of Reformation. Unfortunately, despite the efforts of conference planners, this year's discussants numbered only one from the South and only two women, although an Orthodox theologian and a Seventh-Day Adventist scholar were welcome additions to the communions represented in the series of consultations.

In the course of our days together, we have identified areas of common understandings as well as areas where questions remain open. These two areas are sometimes called "convergences" and "divergences," but we prefer to use other language to avoid a sense of binding churchly quality, although the two phrases have been used in earlier consultations. The common understandings and open questions are briefly noted in the following.

Common understandings

We are ready to affirm that by grace alone we are accepted, liberated, and empowered by God and that soteriology involves ethics and sanctification. Thus, justification has not only individual but communal and social consequences.

Despite our legitimate commitments to our several confessional heritages, our understanding of new life in Christ calls us to affirm and assert our shared identity in Christ. We recognize that in this growing sense of shared identity we are achieving a basic intent of the consultation.

In faith we affirm that new life in Christ is grounded in the reality of the triune God.

All of the traditions represented agree that justification becomes a reality through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, which includes his life and actions, in light of his death and resurrection.

We have learned throughout Christian history, in particular again during the bloody 20th century, that life in Christ involves costly grace, and that the challenge to faithful discipleship continues. We should make greater efforts to tell the stories of such discipleship expressed in human lives, recognizing in them authentic Christian witness that points to the reason for doctrinal confession.

Instead of speaking of "The Reformation," it is more helpful to speak of different specific and historic "Reformations," recognizing similarities and differences, rather than assuming or searching for one comprehensive definition.

Our sense of the relationship between church and world is now very different from that of 16th century Western Europe. We now need to acknowledge the impact of pervasive secular society, so that our common task and challenge are to image forth a social vision of the Gospel, including attention to issues of justice and injustice. In this way, we reflect our prophetic heritage.

Open questions

Though we were agreed on the many Biblical images of growth in Christ, we differed on whether growth had a progressive quality, since such growth does not merit salvation. How does our ecclesiology relate to this concern?

In light of the Quaker understandings of continuous revelation and our diverse habits of discourse, we need to consider the question: does the continued discussion of traditional issues of theological discourse still have a useful function? Will the formulation of new vocabulary help us get beyond stereotypes?

Finally, in the face of desperate human need and pressing social problems, we ask ourselves: what is the most appropriate investment of energy, time, and priority to be given to theological discussion?

The future?

At the end of earlier consultations we agreed that we wanted to continue the conversation. After considering whether we have now completed our work, whether there are further questions we are particularly constituted to address, whether some of the participant groups should reconstitute a successor body to pick up newly urgent agenda, we agreed to name a small continuation committee (O. Mateus, L. Miller, M. Opocensky and an LWF representative) to plan another consultation, preferably located in Prague, within two or three years. It was agreed to seek Anglican participation.

The following topics or questions have been put forward as possible themes:

Should we seek ways of removing the formal anathemas expressed in our respective confessional statements?

Are the participant groups of the Prague VI Consultation ready to take seriously their obligation to find helpful prophetic words to help overcome the violence and exclusions of our world?

How can we move toward deeper cooperation as churches to address the problems threatening us ecologically and to reduce the widened resource and financial gaps between peoples, especially since the end of the bi-polar world?

Participants:

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