**TITLE: Michael Weinrich: As a Protestant voice in Europe, I would like to see a pointed commitment to peace**

**LEAD: Michael Weinrich – German reformed theologian and former board member of the CPCE – will be the opening lecturer of the “Being Church Together”, the academic conference to mark 50 years of the Leuenberg Agreement in Debrecen, Hungary next week. On this occasion, we talked about the need for common responsibility of the Protestant churches in Europe, the message of the Leuenberg Agreement today, and also about the "ecumenical paradox".**

**Text: Dóra Laborczi/CPCE/GEKE**

**“Being Church Together” is the title of the conference where you will be the open lecturer. What do you think: what does this title mean for the present day in the European context and what would you personally highlight in this topic?**

Certainly, the Church is an institution, but above all, it emerges in concrete life as a social event. Its being is not static, but it happens in a living process. It stands for the message of God's reconciliation with humanity, which it witnesses in word and deed. And in doing so, its nature is not exclusive, but inclusive. It should be always oriented toward communion, whether as an individual church or with a view to ecumenism. This brings us exactly to what CPCE stands for. It is a modest institution, but above all a living process in which the participating churches realize the church communion they have declared. It is exactly about „Being Church Together“ here in Europe and today.

**This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Leuenberg Agreement. How do you see what has changed in the last 50 years? Have the goals of the Agreement been achieved?**

From the beginning, there were different interpretations of the Leuenberg Agreement and especially of its understanding of church fellowship. As much as overcoming the mutual condemnations of the churches was close to everyone's heart, there was no clear idea of the concrete form of the fellowship made possible by the Agreement. This is true on the one hand with regard to the shared ecclesiology and at least as clearly with regard to the understanding of communion. Both topics have since been thoroughly worked on by CPCE. In the meantime, a separate type of ecumenism has emerged which is clearly different from the traditional ecumenism of convergence and consensus. In my understanding, however, the reference hermeneutics advocated by CPCE, which focuses on the churches' reference to their ground, has a decided advantage over traditional concepts. This has certainly been registered and critically discussed in the worldwide ecumenical community, but this discussion about the right ecumenical hermeneutics is still far from reaching its goal. There is also a need for further discussion on this within the CPCE, even if its existence already demonstrates this other way of ecumenism.

**You are a reformed theologian in Lutheran Germany, where Calvinist, Lutheran, and united churches also exist. Does it still matter to be a Calvinist or a Lutheran there? This question could sound totally different from a Hungarian, a German, or a Dutch context.**

It depends very much on the context of whether the denominational character plays a role or not. More strangely, the greatest difficulties arise precisely where efforts are made to deepen communion. In normal everyday life, confessional issues rarely play a role, but when it comes to ecumenism, confessional issues come back. I call this the "ecumenical paradox," which can be observed at all levels, even in worldwide ecumenism. The best way to avoid this is not to focus on harmonizing the differences resulting from the past but to look forward and face together the question of the particular mission of the church. In this view of the mission of the church, the different confessional profiles can then organically be experienced as enrichment. After all, it is not a matter of the churches preserving their confessional status as meticulously as possible, but rather of proving themselves in view of their mission and mandate.

**You were also a board member of the CPCE from 2012-2018, so you could see different traditions across Europe. I also would like to know if you see any differences in the field of the communion of the protestant churches in different European countries.**

Yes, the differences within CPCE are just as great as the cultural differences that exist between the churches. It is not going too far to say that the respective contextual differences are also directly reflected in the various theological positions. It would probably be worth thinking more carefully about how much our contextual imprints are reflected in our theological attitudes. Then there is Scandinavian modesty juxtaposed with spirited southern European determination or the somewhat fastidious German persistence with Dutch willingness to change. And one can also feel that CPCE has different meanings for the different churches. It is more important to the Eastern European churches than, say, to the Scottish Reformed. Differences can also be found in whether a church is a majority church or a minority church in its country. It is true that all churches are struggling with the fact that they are becoming smaller, but this circumstance only indirectly affects their ecumenical commitment. The CPCE Council's study on the diaspora seems to me to be an important guide here.

**What kind of challenges do you see if you are thinking about the communion of protestant churches in the 21st century?**

In ecumenism we have learned that changes never happen overnight. On the one hand, far-reaching patience is required and, on the other hand, concrete agreements to establish encounters and practices to be introduced in the churches that are suitable for forming traditions in the church communion. To put it mildly, the communion of CPCE suffers a lack of presence in the everyday life of its member churches. Now it is not important that it has to be on everyone's lips as an institution, but the fact that there is a mutually supportive church communion in Europe should already be recognizable at various points in the church life of the member churches. It is not a question of moving towards some institutional association, but in the life of every church it should not only be desirable, but also tangible, that it is lived out in communion with other churches in order to witness together to the one Church of Jesus Christ. This is more than mutual hospitality. It is a spiritual bond that is indeed deeply part of the essence of the Church, even if we often do not give it the attention it deserves. The fact that there are also other functions of the CPCE, for example in view of the situation in Europe which has become so fragile, can only ever be the consequence of this primary purpose. As a Protestant voice in Europe, I would like to see a pointed commitment to peace on the part of the CPCE, which does not simply join in from the side of the currently opposing alternatives, but also does justice to its theological responsibility. We are living in a dramatic worldwide militarisation, which the churches should resolutely oppose, so that mistrust does not leave the military machinery to its laws. Unfortunately, there is no reason to fear that the CPCE will run out of topics in the turbulent times in which we are currently living.

**What is the main message of the Leuenberg agreement for the present day?**

I see in CPCE a promising ecumenical concept which is not based on the self-assertion of the churches, but consistently places the being of the churches in the horizon of the message to be proclaimed by the church. It is this functional determination on which the promise of the one church rests. Because the content of the message has to be at the centre of the churches, all other hurdles which see the church standing between can only be seen as secondary. In this respect, the impulse emanating from the Leuenberg Agreement cannot, in my opinion, be valued highly enough.