

Report from Conference considering “Liminal Protestantism – European Protestantism in times of change.”

A conference considering “Liminal Protestantism European Protestantism in times of change,” took place from April 24-27 in Hydepark, Doorn, in The Netherlands. The conference was organised by the Council for World Mission European Region, the *Sozial-Wissenschaftliches Institut* of the Lutheran Church in Germany and the *Expertisecentrum* of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. The conference arose from the presupposition that despite the variety of forms of European Protestantism the churches all face similar developments in society, particularly regarding the place of religion and its position in society. Protestant Churches in Europe all experience declining church membership, less influence in the public sphere, and a renewed awareness of the imperative to communicate the gospel in a society where increasing numbers of people have little or no experience or knowledge of the church and gospel.

This presupposition was shared by participants at the conference and created space for an open approach to the subject. In advance of the conference it was not clear how churches in the different countries understood these challenges, what their experiences were or where they were looking for solutions. Whilst participants came from different churches with their histories and positions in society, they all shared a Protestant identity and as such were successors of a particular culture and view of European history. The conference created an opportunity to consider questions like, “What similarities do we share, how do we see the future, what can we learn from each other? Did participants share a feeling of liminality – being on a threshold? Did participants recognise a long history of strong connections between church and society but a future without old securities?”

This report is not a written account of all different contributions rather it seeks to highlight important themes emerging from the conference “Liminal Protestantism.”

Church and society

The consultation provided clear evidence that all countries European Protestant churches needed to redefine their positions in society, especially countries where the church-state-connection is very strong, e.g. Norway and Denmark where the difficulty of redefining authority in an appropriate way in a modern society was especially marked. Who or what institution has the final decision on church issues when traditionally parliament and government decide? Whilst Parliaments are chosen by the people and in the past could therefore give decisions democratic legitimacy, this is no longer trustworthy when, as in Denmark less than fifty percent of the parliament belongs to the national church. Defining the problem is not necessarily a step forward to a solution as it can take years for a national debate on the link between church and state, and if there is to be a division what kind of church government could be developed? Is it possible to substitute the national elections with church elections? This would require candidates for election to take positions on issues relevant for church life. When this was tried in the Church of Norway there was strong resistance to allowing candidates take positions on controversial issues as this harmed the character of the church and disrupt the peace of the church.

In Germany there remains a strong relationship between church and state. Recently the heads of the federal states in Germany unanimously agreed to pay subsidies to the churches in addition of the existing church tax. The legacy of the state church relationship, which is very much a feature of the German church, contributes to a church context of ‘believing without belonging.’ The population are consumers of religion provided by the church and subsidised by the state.

Although these examples are specific to Germany and the Scandinavian countries, it is clear that with Protestant Europe there is widespread uncertainty about the church’s authority and legitimacy

whether at local, regional or national level. In modern societies, enterprises and institutions, people have become accustomed to modern ways of deliberations and decision making. People are accustomed to having clarity about politician's opinions and positions, demanding to know on what base they elect people and on what basis decisions will be made. The Protestant churches historic, hierarchical structures, whether a regional bishop or the authority of the elders and deacons in a local congregation do not longer fit with modern ways of belonging and participating.

Congregation and membership

The tensions between old structures and the way modern people organise their belonging and participation is most apparent in the local congregation. The medieval pattern of Protestant churches, based around a local congregation in each village, was able to continue for most of the 20th century. This type of parochial congregation looks much like a family structure. It is an objective community, based on place of birth. As with a family there is an awareness of history, tradition and social relations. Structures of power are fixed and familiar to each member and participation is in principle for life. For a variety of reasons people do not commit themselves in this way to a congregation anymore. Instead, they choose a congregation where they feel at home for the time being, resulting in congregations looking more like circles of friends. It is likely that this attitude is quite common in a lot of congregations. Studies in Germany show that many congregations can be characterised as "passive organisations", governed by boards of elders/deacons who first seek peace within their own board (being friends!), rather than trying to reach goals and evaluate processes.

This development creates a twofold tension in churches. Many congregations have become too small to continue on their own and have to cooperate or merge with other congregations. In many places the process of joining together is difficult process as it brings together different church cultures, identities, historical traditions and spiritualities, whereas from the point of church government it is often unavoidable. For the future the institutional Church has to look for a process between compulsion and indifference. An interesting example is given from the canton of Zürich, where on cantonal level it was necessary to reduce the number of congregations from 129 to under 50; inviting all congregations to participate in a year-long process of reflection and negotiation. Congregations were free not to participate if they chose realising that not to participate in the process risks vanishing within a couple of years.

This is one (often the more or less official church policy) way to deal with old structures under new circumstances. The other way is to leave the parochial structure behind, creating new communities for a shorter or longer period of time, organizing events, sermons, choirs, courses, diaconal activities. These new forms need not to aim at conversion or official church membership, rather they seek to share the relevance of the gospel and the protestant tradition with those who do feel any connection to the institutional church.

To clarify, the local parish retains important functions for the community. In many parts of Germany church is one of the few remaining institutions for all people, however, it remains as a social and cultural feature rather than a religious one. The German people still engage with the parish church, especially older people (60-75 years old) who are beginning to dominate local parish life. In itself this is not a bad thing it will however fundamentally alter the shape of local parish churches.

Church institutions are trying to adjust historic church patterns to new social conditions. Church members are increasingly no longer interested in the structures and functions of church, seeking instead fulfilling religious experiences and places for personal development to orient themselves in a value splintered culture, or (as appears in Germany among those over 60 years old, being not really interested in religion) they seek social and cultural activities.

In general terms, the difference between the generations is worth consideration. A study in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands shows that as a consequence of rapid social change and important life events during their formative years people across the generations have different relationships with life and society, in terms of their needs for bonding, belonging, identity, religion, authority. Whilst these generational differences may vary between countries, it can be expected that in church these differences play a role and have to be considered in relation to congregation development. Especially because it is to be expected that those of over 60 will play a central role in the continuation of many congregations over the next decades. It is self-evident that what they expect from church is different to those aged between 25-35 years old.

Leadership

In times of uncertainty people seek leadership. The church is no exception to this rule looking first to leadership firstly from local ministers and pastors. Are local ministers capable, well-educated and willing to be leaders? Evidence points towards ministers being reluctant to take on leadership roles or use modern management strategies in their role. Ministers refuse to formulate clear goals or use clear criteria to evaluate success or failure; they hesitate to use the evaluative instruments to improve their performance, methods or behaviour. Ministers see their office as different from other types of work and therefore consider such measurements inappropriate. This attitude runs the risk of alienation from church members who live and work in a society that uses such measurements all the time. At some points ministers remain with no other instrument to evaluate their work or their own feelings, and this in a period of ongoing decline of church membership and relevance of church in society. What does this mean for the professional attitude of ministers?

Studies in Germany show ministers and pastors see their work as a way of self-realisation, that is leadership becomes self-leadership. They work within their own parishes and in this context define their work with vague terms like spiritual welfare, caring of souls, preaching etc. Ministers claim autonomy and assess success in terms of self-reference: understanding themselves as successful if they feel so. When ministers don't feel successful this is caused by the environment - the congregation - because the minister is already doing all that they are able. So when ministers are unhappy in their work, one reaction is to work harder still, leading to a feeling of "joyful over-taxation". Pastors are satisfied with their own suffering since this validates their ministry and justifies their existence.

Academic theology

Where the church is marginalised in society it is obvious that governments are disinterested in theology as a social science. A lack of students studying theology directly effects funds available for theology faculties and this has influenced a process of turning towards the more 'neutral' science of religions over theology. The position of theology within universities has been weakened, consequently academic theology tends to focus more and more on itself, trying to cope with the general accepted academic criteria for scientific work, thus losing contact with the Protestant churches - their natural partners and *raison d'être*. Is this why developments and challenges within the local congregations are not always supported or deepened by theological reflection? Does not the ecclesiological approach of churches stick too closely to the old structures? Or even to the old conviction that the church is the body of Christ, whereas the conviction is growing that Christ goes ahead of the church before she came to preach Christ and is present after the church has vanished? Also the movement of emerging churches raises new theological questions, insisting on the importance that people no longer belong to the church but are the church themselves. A consequence of such historic understandings is that church members delegate religious communication to the church as an institution and do not communicate themselves. How to take the step from a consumer church to a missional church has also a lot to do with theology - a

theology that must be developed within the churches because it does not seem to be all that relevant for the academic theology.

The relevance of Protestantism

The themes highlighted above concerning the renewal of Protestant churches in Europe beg the question about the relevance of Protestantism in Europe today. As Protestants we admit that few of us contend that an eternal hell is waiting for those who are not converted and baptised. And neither has Protestantism ever claimed church membership is the only source or way for eternal salvation. Furthermore we have to admit that Protestantism is no guarantee for a good (common) life together, especially given that the 20th century Europe can be characterised by two wars between two Protestant countries. So we have to realise that regaining relevance in society is not merely a matter of new structures, methods, or attitudes but has to do with the relevance of Protestantism itself. This presupposes the acknowledgement that Protestantism has little argument for claiming relevance in society. We have to consider why society and people in 21st century Europe are better off with than without the Protestant inheritance. It is possible (and coherent with the gospel) that the answer to this question only emerges after our received forms of Protestantism die.

Liminal Protestantism

The terms “liminal” and “liminality” are not very familiar. The term has been re-introduced by the cultural anthropologist Victor Turner (1907-1983) to indicate processes of social transition; groups who are on a threshold, leaving old structures to enter open space where they can invent new structures and identities. “Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Noy to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations and of ideas and relations may arise.”

Therefore, “Liminal Protestantism” seems an appropriate term to describe the position of Protestantism in Western Europe. Protestant Churches find themselves on a threshold, having lost positions of influence in European countries and needing to find new structures and identities. Liminal also has to do with separation and marginality. At the margins there is the possibility to leave old customs and patterns for new ways of re-entering society. It is similar to leaving the old city of Jerusalem to visit the tomb outside the city, only to find the tomb is empty and discover the risen Christ. During the conference we discovered that the term “liminality” was a useful term and that further enquiry was required into the character and opportunities being liminal presented to the Protestant Churches in Europe.

Immediately prior to the “Liminal Protestantism” conference it became apparent that the “GEKE,” - the Conference of Protestant Churches in Europe, had some years previously initiated a process of reconsideration the future of Protestant Churches in Europe. We now see our conference as a contribution to this process and therefore we shall offer this report to the board of GEKE. The participants of the conference were positive about meeting each other at the level of policy-advisers, to share experiences and research results from every day church life in confrontation with new approaches and theories in social sciences. We think this a useful and indispensable complementation to the considerations on the level of church leaders. It is our intention to look for possibilities to continue the unavoidable reflections on “Liminal Protestantism.”