

“Verbindlichkeit“ in local settings.

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The Evangelical Church of Augsburg Confession seeks also in the present time to understand anew the authority of the Church and its decision making bodies, international confessional and ecumenical networks, its confessional heritage and the framework for freedom of its components (district, deanery, congregation, auxiliary organizations with legal authority and individuals).

The present basic order of the Church is the following:

The Church is understood as a unity of components. The Synod is the only authority in developing the legal framework of the Church. The Synod takes decisions which have binding authority for the whole Church. The legal entities which are a part of the larger entities are obliged to respect the decision of the higher decision making body. The higher decision making bodies have to respect the liberties given by the Church Constitution to the lower ones. (See more in The constitution of the Evangelical Church of Augsburg Confession in Slovakia, Uhrovec 1993)

There are several events which show the permanency of the struggle with the issue of authority vice versus the independence and freedom.

1. Our Church considers the Book of Concord and especially the Augsburg Confession as the ones which present the true teaching of our Church because they explain the Bible in a true way. But in the recent years the Church internationally and locally has made new declarations with doctrinal content. Our international networks have adopted new doctrinal statements. It was our idea that we should in a proper way, showing the status of each of them, publish together these statements, confessions... (Lima document, Leuenberg concord, Joint declaration, Slovak local agreement on the acceptance of baptism between Lutherans and Catholics... Charta ecumenical). There was however a rather strong resistance and broad hesitation as to how to deal with such a proposal. Why and how should the Church publish and accept these new documents with a different though confessional quality. This resistance and hesitation was based on the lack of clarity of the position and lack of terms, by which the importance and binding power (*Verbindlichkeit*) of each of them would be described or limited. We were not able to overcome this obstacle. We have realized, the problem can not be resolved nationally.
2. A Congregation can elect its pastor only from candidates approved by the Chair of the respective district. In the recent synod of June 2007 an attempt has been made to change it from approval of the candidates into a recommendation of the candidates. The same was proposed to the synod by some members to the election of the deans. In this case an approval of a candidate was needed from the chair of the whole Church. The synod refused to support such a change of the constitution after a very profound discussion on the ministry of oversight, which is a historical feature also of the Lutheran Church. The existence of the LWF debate on this issue and the recent paper of the episcopacy has also been mentioned. We could read this in such a way that we do not want to give up being a church! We do not want to be changed to a confederation of Lutheran congregations!
3. The election system by which the participation of individuals, units of the Church and the authority of those participating in the ministry of episcopé is being permanently reconsidered. (Presently we have a system of grass roots election, by members of the Church in the congregations of the chairpersons of all the four layers of the Church,

pastors, deans, bishops and inspector and a system of selection of candidates). The Church has after each election a strong feeling that the election system should be changed. The goal would be a better chance for the Church to elect democratically a candidate of the Church. The goal is transparency and control of the process. The goal is to put barriers to any manipulation in any part of the process and to avoid a single candidate system. Also here international cooperation among the protestant Churches which from the beginning have been keen on democracy: Lutheran and Reformed through e.g. GeKe, would be welcome.

4. The Church has in the past 16 years tried to establish several instruments of sharing of resources. The values (also material) given to the Congregation in an unequal way, should be shared through Church structures. Different foundations were established and congregations were compelled by the synod to contribute to them. It was a gradual process with a lot of discussions. The recent synod received a proposal to dissolve some of them. The majority refused to support such a proposal. In the same way the recent synod has refused to support the proposal to abolish a binding voice, approval, of the higher unit of the Church in the case of the will of the lower decision unit to sell the property.

There are many background events, experiences and historical struggles, which influence this search for more democracy and enough authority enabling the Church to function as a body of Christ sharing values and overcoming weaknesses.

1. The ecclesiological principles, the basic Church order. The Church order of the reformation times called: Synodal-presbyterian Church order, coming from the (reformed) reformation in Switzerland of the 16th cent., has been used by the Lutheran Church in diaspora in Europe as a good Church order. Part of this order is the basic role of the Congregations in the Church structure with its parochial (understood geographically) nature. What does this basic role of the congregation mean and what is the role of the synod and other instruments in sharing and oversight? These questions represent a tension, which has to be resolved anew.

2. The authority of a doctrinal and organizational kind is a typical sign of the hierarchical structures of the Catholic Church. This Church has caused many problems for Protestants in Slovakia and other countries in the region. Words like Recatholization – Counterreformation represent a fearful living memory. Therefore an attempt to establish, to define and to execute any kind of authority resembles the behavior of the Catholic Church. To be protestant means to stress freedom and to be careful in the case of any authority.

This could however mean ultimately also lack of unity and ability to act together. Development of mission strategies, which only should be based on the activity of the local congregations, often represents a problem. Congregations tend to be led by self-preservation and not by a missionary, growing and expanding nature.

In our country there are living examples, that it is often easier for the Catholic Church to establish a new congregation (e.g. in the parts of the towns which were built in the socialist times without a Church), and to start mission work there, because it is a decision of the bishop and not the one of the congregations or its pastor/s.

3. People remember the socialist way of organizing society and the harsh control of the whole society and specifically Christians and the Churches. Therefore, there is a strong oversensitivity against anything which resembles centralism.

4. Dealing with power, authority and rights for individuals has been also in history a problem related to the present stage of democracy, and the changes in society. The times which we experience, described correctly as a time of a loss of inherited values and liberalism, represents a new challenge to the Church and its inner authority and freedom.

A successful resolution of the tension between individual rights, space for responsibility and activity of individuals and units (components) of the Church on one side and the authority of the Church instruments of unity, oversight, sharing and joint action on the other side will finally bring the body of Christ to making clear decisions.

It could mean a disintegration of the body, weakening of the weak parts and individualistic isolation of the stronger ones.

Or it could mean also an organized process of strengthening of one another as a body and a better chance to be part of God's mission in the world. It also in this way could mean a better chance to act together with other Churches and with people of good will for the good of the world. We have many examples of this in our part of the world in Central and Eastern Europe especially in these times of the rediscovery of freedom and rights, in these times of more openings for the mission of the Church. The last one requires the will to act together and respect the role of the Church as a living Body of Christ in the World of today.

We are dealing with an issue which is essential not only to the understanding of but to the mission of the Church.

Literature:

- Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche, Vandenhoeck Ruprecht 1955
- The constitution of the Evangelical Church of Augsburg Confession in Slovakia, Uhrovec 1993

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