

Being the Church - Becoming the Church into the Third Millennium

Episcopal Address to the 13th Session of the Central Conference of the
United Methodist Church in Central and Southern Europe
March 12-16, 1997 in Aarau, Switzerland

Introduction

Four years ago, the Episcopal Address was given under the theme "Liberation to Solidarity". It was dealing with the challenges of a time of new nationalism in a multicultural society. At that time we were fascinated by the great changes in Europe and we were full of hope, thinking that the daily life for everybody and especially for the Churches in Central Europe, in the Balkan and in North Africa would become much easier, but these hopes did not come true. We were also expecting the solidarity in our Connection between East and West and South and North in Europe to develop without obstacles and hindrances, but our hopes were destroyed by the ongoing war in the Balkan, the civil war in Algeria and the politically unstable circumstances. In many places the ecumenical climate has turned cold or even frozen. The economy broke down in the former socialist countries. In Western Europe as well there is a growing number of unemployed people. In some countries people are suffering and starving. The survival of the middle class is endangered.

Gathered together here in Aarau we confess that we only have been able to carry on by the grace of God and with the solidarity of the Methodist family, willing to share what they have. The three dimensions of our ministry - Kerygma, Diakonia and Koinonia - have become a living reality among us. If we look back into the four years behind us, we are very grateful for the things the Lord has done among and through us. In spite of the limited resources, we experienced awakening and growth.

The upcoming quadrennium will lead us into the third millenium. We trust that God's grace is new every morning and also every newly beginning millenium. On our way into the third millenium, we the Church will continue to experience the same tension between tradition and innovation. On the one hand we can say that a history of two thousand years connects us with the church of the early Christians of the New Testament. On the other hand we are still waiting for the Kingdom of God to break fully into our world and time. If we endure this tension, the church will keep her vitality, but if the church is defending herself or hiding behind her own history or if the church will simply join in the spirit of the age, she will lose the roots and the perspective of the Kingdom of God. In the midst of the hard times that have fallen upon us, we continue to march to Zion. In the perspective of the Kingdom of God, we understand ourselves to still be on the way to **becoming the church**.

We are experiencing new church development in many places of our Central Conference. Together with these new congregations we have to learn afresh what it means to be part of the Methodist tradition. And what about the situations of declining membership and the impression of cultivating dry land, that make us grow weary?

If we are oriented towards the Kingdom of God, times of drought may become times of catharsis (purification). From time to time we need to be tested if we are still compatible with the Kingdom of God¹ , if we are faithful to the vision of the Kingdom.

On our way towards the Kingdom of God, we have not yet composed and sung the most beautiful hymns, we have not yet explored the new dimensions of our common diaconal and our evangelistic ministry, and we have not yet shared our Methodist strengths and weaknesses with our brothers and sisters in the ecumenical family. There are many wonderful things ahead of us.

Church history started at Pentecost with the coming of the Holy Spirit and she will continue until the Kingdom comes. On this way the church is always imperfect and our task is an unfinished one. We are still on our way to becoming the church. On this pilgrimage Christ will always be the foundation and the center of all we are or could become.

Translation: Heinrich Bolleter

¹ Urs Eigenmann in an article in the journal of the Swiss Evangelical and Catholic Women's Association "Schritte ins Offene" (Steps into the Open), Nr. 2, 1996

1. Being the Church between Inspiration and Institution

1.1 Accepting the Dilemma

Only a person who understands and keeps up with the dilemma of the church will do justice to what the church is supposed to be. A Catholic theologian who addressed this question was excommunicated because of his statement by Pope Pius X. The “heretical” sentence was: “Jesus promised the Kingdom of God, and the Church came.” The church can be seen as the continuation of Jesus’ ministry, wrought by the Spirit, but she is not God’s Kingdom. By Christ’s command and the promised Holy Spirit she is God’s Creation, but still and always a historical construction, an institution within time. She has to organize herself and to secure her duration not only by spiritual, but secular means also. It is not surprising, then, if we have to deal with this tension with our every step (*auf Schritt und Tritt*): the tension between institution and inspiration, between money and spirit, between traditionalism and prophetism, between theological doctrine and charismatic experiences and so on. Living and keeping up within this tension is the normal task of the church’s daily living. A person who flees from this tension loses the biblical-theological reality of being the church. Church would be turned into pious niche-fellowship, where mainly postmodern wishful thinking would be satisfied, as e.g. the need for harmony, for permanent religious stimulation, for pious culture without questions. As the United Methodist Church, we do not let ourselves be pushed into such a niche. In a conscious way we say yes to the dilemma of the church on her way through time and in expectation of God’s Kingdom.

As ecclesiastical existence permanently faces this dilemma, theological training is needed, spiritual leadership and conciliatory processes. To put it into terms of Methodist ecclesiology: we need well trained lay people, we need leadership by the ordained ministers and the superintendents and we need the conference.

Observation: Especially in missionary contexts where new churches are planted and where many lay-missionaries work, the lack of ordained theologians is quickly evident. Where there is not enough “order”, the double necessity of inspiration and institution is not kept up. One sided piety with legalistic demands takes room. This then blocks church growth or leads to schisms.

1.2 Inspiration

John Wesley knew about the dilemma of the church’s existence. In 1786 he wrote: “I do not fear that the people called Methodists shall ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. I only fear that they shall exist as a dead sect having the form of religion, but not the power thereof, and that undoubtedly will be the case unless they hold fast the doctrine, discipline and the spirit with which they first set out.”

Inspiration does not happen within a vacuum. Living church results from the Spirit wrought assignment of binding tradition of faith and challenging social situation. The Holy Spirit does not sit on our roof as a dove. He comes in where people are today, and he speaks to the fellowship of saints through the words of the Gospel. The Spirit helps us in our weakness, that means, he gives us inspiration and strength, to put the Gospel into practice in today’s society, not to be mean with the grace entrusted to us, not worrying about the status quo, but to cross boundaries. “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and the Gospel will save it.” Mark 8:35

Observation: God has far more ways than we think. Where ever in our Episcopal Area new churches have been planted, or new diaconal initiatives founded, this development was not sponsored by some model of church growth (*Pate stehen*) or by one of the (*feilbieten*) missionary concept promoted today.

Everywhere it happened on the very simple background that one person or a little group was open to relate the grace received by faith to their challenging situation (*or: environment*) and to answer the call, who hit them from this spirit wrought assignment. More than 40 different stories could be told here, how in the past four years new churches have been founded.

Inspiration depends in an authoritative way on whether we permit the Holy Spirit to bring the two dimensions together: the tradition of our faith, namely the grace entrusted to us, and the social, cultural and religious situation we live in. The call results from it, the urgency of our actions or our evasion or even escape. Here the story of Jona repeats itself, or the story of other prophets.

Observation: The past four years in the Episcopal Area leave me with the impression that we are a very active and inspired church. In situations with young churches this activity is directed more outward. Historically grown churches tend to be more self-absorbed (*or: occupy themselves with themselves / to devote their attention to themselves*). All in all I do not worry about the church's continued existence, even though in most Annual Conferences there are bottlenecks, mainly in the area of personell and finance.

1.3 The Church as an Institution of our Time

Church always is a historical object. (*geschichtliche Größe*). In Central and Southern Europe we are made aware of this fact in many ways. Church is a historical object and as such part of social processes. Until now, we did not think through the question of how capitalism and socialism impact the church's way. A person who wants to devote oneself to this subject needs at the same time great proximity to the situations lived through but also an overall view from a distance.

The church also shares the history of the past fifty years with the extermination of the Jews and the expulsion of refugees. 50 years after World War II the archives have been opened and all nations, whether affected by the war or "spared" (as some neutral nations used to put it), have to digest their history and that at a moment in time when one thought history could be ticked off. As a Central Conference we took up the subject at the beginning of the nineties already. All Annual Conferences have received an invitation through the study documents of our *Arbeitsgruppe für Theologie und Predigtamt*, to start conversation (*or: discussion*) about the subject "The Church and Israel". Especially the chapters "Methodism and Jews: the burden of the past" and "New Testament texts with an antisemitic effect" have been recommended for study. In the meantime the General Conference also made available a text on the subject *mit dem englischen Originaltext vergleichen...* "Building bridges in hope - a United Methodist comment on Christian-Jewish relationships". This text seeks to encourage the church on all levels, mainly locally, to enter into dialogue with Jews and together to fight for justice.

It is my observation that we find it hard to include this subject into our list of priorities for discussions within our churches. There may be diverse reasons for this. For some of our Annual Conferences the question of survival within their own situation is so *hautnah*, that

no strength or time is left to occupy oneself with other subjects. *Sinngemäss: For some of our Annual Conferences the struggle for existence within their own situation takes all their energy - neither strength nor time is left to deal with other subjects.*

As a Free Church and a Minority Church we have to continually occupy ourselves in a new way with the relationship of church and state. As a church we do not stand neutrally towards the state, we help to carry the sociopolitical responsibility. Ours is a prophetic duty to warn the state. We take trouble to understand the respective conditions and situations and to answer them. We also insist on being historical churches in the countries of our Episcopal Area. In some countries our history approaches 150 years of existence.

Observation: The relationship of church and state sometimes concerned us more than we would have liked. In the formerly socialist countries, who would like to quickly join the European Community, on a constitutional level freedom of religion and conscience has been quickly introduced. In many countries there is no new church legislation yet. This means that the daily living together of church and state does in no way agree with the freedom of religion guaranteed in the constitution. Especially states in which the Orthodox church claims the sole right to represent Christianity, have returned to a very restrictive policy towards protestant churches. Newly handed in statutes of the church of agreements on the return of confiscated property, on free religious practice (e.g. preaching in front of foreign guests, renting rooms in public buildings, building churches in town centers...) have been questioned again here and there. As far as cooperation in *sociodiatconical* projects is concerned, we encounter more open-mindedness.

Verkirchlichung of our Christianity is often related to institutions. Don't we parrot too easily the secular tiredness about institutions by accepting this view? *Verkirchlichung* happens mainly where we retreat within our own circles and cultivate just our own church as core-fellowship.

Observation: It is pleasing to observe, how especially our church-structures (charge conferences, district conferences, annual conferences, *Pfarrerversammlungen, Laientagungen, Schulungskurse und Arbeitsgruppen*) contribute to positive formation and development in those conditions where the church is growing. Where the church stagnates, we often develop an anti-structural reflex. The tiring translation of our Book of Discipline into the official languages of the Annual Conferences brought helpful clarification for the daily life of the churches.

Church exists within this world and has to assert her stability with means of this world as well. As far as the temporal household and the working structures of our church are concerned, we definitely experience helpful impetus from the area of modern management in non-profit organizations.

Observation: I am convinced that we are not ready to sell theology for stew to modern management methods. Nevertheless we can learn many things with reference to our church's household and questions of management from experts. Here and there some spiritual loosening exercises are necessary to discover that institution is not the real hindrance, but our own inflexibility. We don't need another flour trough, we need the leaven!

Concerning finance we remark that more than 70 % of our *Gemeindebezirk* within the Episcopal Area can't finance themselves. The older generation, who has been brought up to faithful giving, takes their leave; the younger generation wants to be spontaneous and has a weaker loyalty to their own church in the area of finance. Our living-conditions are so different, that I can't possibly say a general word in this matter. In all situations we have to learn anew to join money and Spirit *Geld und Geist* in such a way as to discuss the thought of tithing in a new way and to lose the fear of sharing. Annual Conferences who have accustomed themselves to a higher standard of living show some trouble to deal with the decline of financial possibilities. If the subject of membership subscription is brought up in such a context it is said very quickly that within the church money is the only thing that's ever talked about. In the poor Conferences we have to learn as well to talk about money. If the church's members don't learn to give their share from the little they have, they will miss out on an important aspect of discipleship.

2. The Church in the Changes and Challenges of our Time

"Let Europe arise!" - with this exclamation Winston Churchill ended his speech in Zurich on Sept 19, 1946. These words were surprising then in the midst of the European ruins of World War II. But this goal was pursued from the Western States in an unwavering way. When one thought to already be very close to it, the former *Commission-President* Jacques Delors said in 1992 at a meeting with representatives of the European Churches, that one had to "give Europe a soul". Should this not succeed, the whole process of integration could fail. Economic interests only can not represent Europe's soul. Most representatives from the former socialist countries will confess today with or without bitterness: "With the turnabout our need did not end".² In East and West and South and North we remark that we in Europe have not at all been prepared for the difficult turnabout. It turned into a way of disappointments, of failure and of most crucial tests (*Zerreissprobe*). It is very well possible within this horizon that European integration will remain a fragment. Either we allow the gap between poverty and wealth to widen or we have a vision of a Europe where the weak and harrassed find their place as well. It cannot be the church's role to find the economical solutions. But the churches are expected to have a vision and to help share the load. The churches are not to cease in their effort to give Europe a soul.

If we remark how difficult those in government find it to cope with the changes and challenges of our time, can we say on behalf of the churches that we find it easier to handle change because of our hope ?

I don't think so. We find it as hard to cope with all the changes in church and society.

Observation: Changes within the church's sphere are usually (*or: in most cases*) adjustments to the conditions. In our church's *Gremien* we decide on many changes: new forms of management of our church's property, salary increases or decreases for our workers, new ways of provision for old age (because the state's pensions do not guarantee survival anymore). Discussions on reducing our personnel begin in our conferences where we sense financial pressure. When making changes is concerned, we as a church are always reacting to changes and challenges in our society. Many changes are necessary, others are just adjustments without phantasy for new missionary and pastoral possibilities. It is striking as well that we are most ready to enter changes if finances are concerned. Europe's economical horizon did change in such a way that our

² G. Bölcskei, Professor for Ethics at the Reformed Academy in Bebecen in an Interview.

established *diaconical* ministries have to be worried about their state-subsidies. For some this raises serious questions about their further existence.

2.1 Change or Transformation

Let me distinguish between the concepts of “change” and “transformation”, as in this distinction³ law and gospel have an effect. Change is what we do in answer to difficulties (*Bedrängnis*). Change is often motivated by rejection of what was till now and has an element of compulsion (*hat etwas Zwanghaftes an sich.*) Many who want to change the church are not reconciled with themselves and with the church. They run the risk of using “force” on themselves and others.

Transformation on the other hand is what God does in us and through us. The aspect of grace is in transformation: God turns my wailing into dancing (Psalm 30:11 - *dt 12*) He turns the sea into dry land (Psalm 66:6). Transformation happens if Saul turns to Paul. There are no boundaries to God’s transforming love. Transformation is resurrection. Transformation is God’s merciful acting within the crises we have to live through. We learn to understand situations that mess up our concept of church, not as an accusation against what we’ve done until now, but as turning-point towards something new. This aspect of grace should first characterize our church’s culture of change. In it we get perseverance (*langer Atem*) to pass the challenges and changes of our time. Not only when our humour and our courage for change get lost do we want to open ourselves to this offer of divine grace. It is this spiritual point of view (*Ansatz*) alone that helps me to stand in the uncounted, greater and smaller challenges of this Episcopal Area.

Our church father John Wesley did always see the whole work of Methodism under the aspect of prevenient, saving and justifying grace of God. When John Wesley asked his preachers: “Do you expect to be made perfect in love in this life”⁴ it was not about the question: “Do you have a sufficient grip on yourself as to not make any mistakes any more?” It was rather the pastoral question: “In all your imperfections, are you open to God’s perfect love, and do you expect to be carried and transformed by this love?”.

2.2 Theologia Viatorum

I experience our church within the Episcopal Area as a community of people travelling together (*Weggemeinschaft*) in a complicated age. The theological spread within our own ranks gives us trouble (*mcht uns zu schaffen*). This spread can be wide if the optimism of grace bears the tension and if love keeps the extremes together.

We experience community within our church as an assembly of those seeking and finding. Community proves itself among other things in granting one another to be on our way as those learning. We resist the Status Confessionis thinking: “Here I stand, I can’t help it”. We open ourselves to a Theologia Viatorum, which means that truth is not a standpoint but a way that we go and that we are willing to share with others. We do not set boundaries but we travel one road. When the Methodist fathers wanted to describe their

³ In this distinction of the two concepts I follow Anselm Grün OSB, “Bilder von Verwandlung” (Images of Transformation), 1993 and “Verwandlung - eine vergessene Dimension geistlichen Lebens” (Transformation - a forgotten dimension of spiritual life), 5th impression 1996, Grünewald, Mainz. My wife pointed me to this author.

⁴ This is the fourth of Wesley’s 19 Questions. He put them to his preachers when they were received as members in full connection in an Annual Conference.

identity, they did not talk about a Methodist Confession, but about “landmarks”. They understood themselves to be on their way. If we hold up this theological identity, our theology as well helps us to go our way through the challenges and changes.

3. Becoming the Church on the Path to the Kingdom of God

Biblically speaking becoming the church refers to the Kingdom of God. On our way into the third millenium we stay in the tension between tradition and innovation. If church barricades herself behind her history or ingratiates herself with the spirit of the age (*or: spirit of the times - im Lexikon für Zeitgeist... habe es von Seite 1 im Absatz “The upcoming quadrennium übernommen*) she loses sight of the horizon of God’s kingdom. In the horizon of God’s Kingdom there is much scope for “becoming church”.

“Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom.” (Luke 12:32)

“Behold, the kingdom of God is within you.” (Luke 17:20f)

“For the kingdom of God is ... righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 14:17)

Every fruitful ecclesiology is embedded into the theology of God’s Kingdom and in it overcomes ecclesiocentrism. The church has not only to manage the message of God’s Kingdom, but to put it into practice in a prophetic way in her own time.

Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker rightly remarked: “The church does not have the mission to change the world, but when the church fulfills her mission, she changes the world.”

3.1 Becoming the Church: Limitations Help us Grow

More and more the churches are aware of their minority position within our pluralistic society. This strengthens awareness for our own limitations. In the horizon of God’s Kingdom a positive assessment of these limitations is possible as well:

Experiencing limitations raises our awareness of the fact that the church is not in herself the Kingdom of God. The church announces God’s Kingdom, she is a prophetic signpost on the path to God’s Kingdom, scaffolding at the building site of God’s Kingdom.

Limitations help us to recognize that Christ is the Lord of the Church. Limitations contribute to identity. As United Methodist Church we are a church with her own possibilities and limitations, and we want to stand by them.

Especially where we have begun with a new presence as a church there were the “two or three” who took seriously Jesus’ promise: “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” (Matt 18:20). On the basis of this promise people began something new gladly and despite limited resources. One did not make God lose his time by mourning what was unfortunately still lacking for effective ministry.

Financial limitations help us to discover time and again that apart from the ministry of fulltime workers our future lies in the voluntary service of members and friends, men and women, old and young. From the very beginning we have been a lay movement. Lay persons have been active in the areas of preaching (not in the pulpit only, but as evangelists within their network of personal relationships), liturgy, and *diaconal* ministry. If we however move to the center of interest volunteer work in a new way we have to take seriously the challenge of training lay persons. The experiences with “Disciple” (Glaubensschritte) in Switzerland, Germany and in the Czech and Slovak Republics is an encouraging pointer into that direction. Built on this demanding course of getting to know one’s Bible are courses for *mitarbeiter und laienpredigerInnen*. Women’s Divisions have given themselves a new structure. They do excellent work as well in training their leaders and activists. Even in diaconal ministry, where in many areas professionalism is asked for,

we can not survive without volunteers: in accompanying sick or dying people, in caring for unemployed people, refugees and addicts, but also in accompanying single mothers, in the area of caring for young people and families, in recreational and formational spheres. Our work in our church's management and authorities, in the production of church newsletters and magazines is done to a growing degree by volunteers. Volunteer work sets a strong accent against a society set on consumption and profit. Even in a society where poverty and unemployment predominate, volunteer work can give meaning. Among the parameters (*zu den Rahmenbedingungen*) of volunteer work are clear instructions (*Beauftragungen*,) competent coaching, training and the necessary recognition as well. In this point the opinions of psychologists, philosophers and theologians agree: people need limitations to grow on (*daran*.) If boundaries are walled up, however, the result may be resignation. If we have our limited possibilities face the complex realities and the huge need in this world our courage may disappear. In this situation the message of the Gospel encourages us to an existence as mustard seeds. In the horizon of God's Kingdom hope stays alive that a great shrub may grow out of it. It is not expected that we *abfahren* to great programs. We are called to simply be what God made us to be, witnesses of his love, Church for others, *reichsgenossen*, who spread hope, reliable Christians, living a uniting faith.

Today's unchurched people often are no longer willing to support the church, yet they expect the church to act in the *diaconal* area, they also expect help from the church in finding orientation. Church has to minister to life and be an attorney of humanity in an unhuman world. Ministry among foreigners, refugees, gypsies, prisoners and other marginalized people has in the recent past yielded the most beautiful fruit in our evangelism.

3.2 Becoming the Church: Creating an Atmosphere of Openness - Building Bridges

Church focusing on God's Kingdom remains a church of hope. She can be very vulnerable, as she focuses the future and does not hide herself in a fortress of orthodoxy. I consider some tendencies towards fundamentalism or towards loud sounds of selfdefence that border on fundamentalism as a symptom of crisis and weakness. One calls for strong convictions and strong leadership within the church, because one is afraid the church might drown in pluralism. People who want to cure fear with narrowness appoint the ram to be gardener. It won't be of use as long as the question of motives remains outside. Where is it supposed to come from, this increased freedom and joy to believe and to act. What can inspire us within our limitations? Is it orthodoxy or the vision of God's nearing Kingdom and its justice? Isn't it the latter?

We have to differentiate between a dogmatical fundamentalism and a fundamentalism that refers to a subject. *und einem Subjekt bezogenen f.* Both don't help us to get along. *Beim Subjekt bezogenen Fundamentalismus* Fundamentalism that refers to a subject deals with the ego-myth in *Neuzeit's* the religion of the modern times. "I say, I believe, I have experienced, I have been called . I can only agree to be ordained if the church changes her stand on baptism. I only can celebrate worship services in this and in no other way any more..." In the horizon of God's Kingdom and his righteousness, in praying "Thy kingdom come, not mine" one is set free from this kind of fundamentalism. In God's Kingdom we will sit at one table, when the Lord will celebrate his meal with us. This challenges us to mutually respect even today the other's integrity in expressing faith and conviction and to listen to one another, to value community higher than just ourselves, to

stay on the common way. Church, that is focused on God's kingdom, will create space and build bridges. Trends in today's society (pluralism and individualism, specialization and privatization) result in a new openness for matters of community. We as a church are called to witness to the world about what it means to create room for one another and to build bridges.

Thus it is hard to understand that *im Bereich der zwischenkirchlichen Beziehungen* in Europe live in ecumenical fellowship at the moment is subject to deep shocks (*Erschütterungen erfährt*). I am thankful that *die Arbeitsgruppe für Theologie und Predigtamt* has done a good, clarifying job (*viel klärende Arbeit geleistet hat*) in the problem area of "Proselytism". The dominating orthodox churches or even other national churches view our mission among people that have alienated themselves from the church totally still as proselytism, which we may find hard to comprehend. This fact doesn't give us license to negatively label their ministry. It isn't enough to mutually judge because of the attitude on proselytism. We rather have to prepare a common Christian witness: joint prayer, joint Bible study, joint diaconal ministry.

The motivation for our ministry is not delimitation or fencing, (*Abgrenzung oder Ausgrenzung*), but God's Kingdom and its righteousness. In this horizon the ecumenical community invites a renewal of all churches in the direction of God's Kingdom.

On the joint way to the second ecumenical Assembly in Graz we actively participate in the process of understanding among Europe's churches. This way stands under the motto: Reconciliation - God's Gift and source of new life. Faced with the interior complexity of the problem it won't be easy to face the global dimension of the chosen subject. The joint declaration on *Kirchengemeinschaft* between the Methodist churches and the churches of the *Leuenberger Kirchengemeinschaft* has been reached. In our Episcopal Area all Annual Conferences with the exception of Bulgaria have carried the declaration. In Bulgaria the matter has not been put before the conference because of many other urgent matters.

We are living in one of the greatest social earthquakes of history. This is the reason why "creating an atmosphere of openness and building bridges" cannot remain an internal subject for the church. The church has to apply the message of God's Kingdom not only to herself, but to put it into practice within society. God's Kingdom and its justice lead us to the many working hard for human dignity and human rights and the protection of creation. Evangelical theologian Volkmar Deile, Secretary General of Amnesty International since 1990 recently gave his opinion: "The introversion of the churches and the degree to which they are occupied with themselves is troubling. I wish for a clearer visibility of how the Gospel moves the church in this concrete society."⁵ It is easy to list the areas where the church should interfere to create an atmosphere of openness for the weak and to build bridges. It's about stabilizing the peace within the patchwork of European cultures. It's about fighting daily and everpresent violence. We recognize the necessity of protecting the family. It's about problems of migration and the laws about asylum. We are challenged by unemployment and new poverty. We remark that legislation in the area of environmental protection stagnates. As a church we cannot solve these problems, but we can set signals as e.g. our winter aid for the poor and starving in the Balkan and Central Europe does. We

⁵ Evangelical Commentaries 11/96 "Solidarität organisieren" (Organising solidarity) - A talk with ai's secretary general.

can create an atmosphere of openness and build bridges, to make encounters and discussions concerning these questions possible or to keep them going on.

We are overtaxed if we make the world our agenda, but we want to contribute our share by seeking God's Kingdom and its righteousness. Then may happen what C.F. von Weizäcker said: "The church does not have the mission to change the world, but when the church fulfills her mission, she changes the world."

3.3 Becoming the Church: Being Faithful to the Vision of the Kingdom

The call to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" does free (*entheben*) the church from a wrong thinking of success. The church is in the service of God's Kingdom, but God's Kingdom is not a pipedream that can be realised on principle by human effort. God's Kingdom, come in Jesus Christ, is the eschatological-utopian horizon, who is on principle beyond human reach. However we can bring our acts into line with this kingdom and its righteousness in the here and now. In this sense we can impose upon ourself the test if we're still compatible with God's Kingdom (faithful to the vision of the Kingdom) as far as our understanding of ourselves and our practice are concerned. As church within time we will always fall behind the goals of God's Kingdom. On our way from past into future we are ready to arrange our ministry as a church in such a way as not only to react to the challenges of our time, to social and pious pressure as well, but to be put anew into the horizon of God's Kingdom. Jesus connected the announcement of God's Kingdom to the call to repent. May he help us to repent, wherever we as a church or as individuals need to.

Called by Jesus Christ, our Lord, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, we want to proclaim the message of God's Kingdom come near. We want to shape our lives more and more after the standard of God's Kingdom. We do not want to withhold from this world and time prophetic criticism oriented at God's Kingdom. We want to work hard for justice and peace, as they are pointed out to us in the horizon of God's Kingdom. In this way we want to be church and become church on our way into the third millenium.

At the end of this address I would like to cordially thank all those with whom I had the privilege to be on the way as bishop of Central and Southern Europe. First I thank the Superintendents who represent me in the often difficult situations in their countries or in our Annual Conferences as well. I thank the Secretary of the Central Conference who looks after (*wahrnehmen*) a special task of coordination in the Balkan. In the same way I thank the tirelessly working secretary in my office in Zurich and the manager of *hilfe im Sprengel*. I thank my wife who accompanies me with much understanding and active interest and also by deliberate taking the second place which makes my manifold ministry within the Episcopal Area possible. I remark that the tasks within the seven Annual Conferences are putting growing demands on the bishop right now. As long as the fellowship does not only demand but as well helps to carry the whole I will gladly continue in the ministry entrusted to me.

In our common task the thing will be in ever new ways to endure the tension between inspiration and institution, to question (*hinterfragen*) our ministry in the sense of testing if we're still compatible with God's Kingdom and to gladly understand ourselves as a church that's becoming the church: where one is allowed to make mistakes, where one is allowed to dream, where one expects that we will still discover the most beautiful songs and prayers on our joint way, where many new ways of ministry in preaching and diaconal service are still open, where we maybe have to let go of old things, but without any bother can begin new things on the basis of Jesus' promises: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for

your Father has been pleased to give you the Kingdom.” (Luke 12:32) and “I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled.” (Luke 12:49)

Delivered at the 13th Session of the Central Conference in Central and Southern Europe, Aarau (Switzerland), March 13, 1997

Grundsatzfrage: The Church - itself oder herself? Antwort: herself!!!

Translation: Ann M. Dällenbach

- 1. Being the Church between Inspiration and Institution**
 - 1.1 To Accept the Dilemma
 - 1.2 Inspiration
 - 1.3 The Church Being an Institution of our Time
- 2. The Church in the Changes and Challenges of our Time**
 - 2.1 Change or Transformation
 - 2.2 Theologia Viatorum
- 3. Becoming the Church on the Path to the Kingdom of God**
 - 3.1 Becoming a Church: Limitations Help us to Grow
 - 3.2 Becoming a Church: Creating an Atmosphere of Openness - Building Bridges
 - 3.3 Becoming the Church: Being Faithful to the Vision of the Kingdom