



A history of the Leuenberg Agreement

Lukas Vischer (1998)

- An agreement on trial
 - A fresh start
 - The course of the discussions
 - Four building blocks
 - The ratification of the agreement
 - European and universal?
 - Twenty-five years on
-

● An agreement on trial

Twenty-five years ago, on March 16 1973, the Leuenberg Agreement was adopted. Of the 41 delegates sent to the meeting at Leuenberg by Lutheran, Reformed and United churches all over Europe, 35 voted for the text of the agreement, four abstained - for very different reasons - and two had already left the conference centre when the vote was taken. No negative votes were cast. The talks had been going on for more than ten years, with several days of meetings almost every year, usually in the week after Easter - to the great dismay of my family - and often with subcommittee meetings between whiles. The text of the agreement had been gradually hammered out over the past two years, and now at last the results had been presented. But there was no mood of excitement or rejoicing - no one felt like celebrating. The negotiations over the preceding days had been difficult and the delegates were tired and irritable. True, the seemingly elusive goal had been achieved. But would the agreement really stand the test? Were the results irreversible? Only time would tell.

Relations between Lutherans and Reformed have gone through many phases over the centuries. In fact, the two traditions never actually separated from one another; it would be truer to say that, despite all the efforts, they never really came together. The Reformation movement had different centres from the start, and hopes that they might join to form one movement were quickly dashed. The Marburg colloquy in 1529 led to the conclusion that the two approaches could not easily be brought under one roof. "You have a different mind!", Luther is reported to have told the men from Zurich. Efforts for unity continued over the decades and the centuries, however, occasionally producing promising results, only to be thwarted again by disappointing setbacks. The untiring mediation of Martin Bucer, for example, or Calvin's attempts to find agreement in the understanding of the Lord's Supper, was unable to prevent the two traditions from gradually hardening into mutually exclusive confessions. Calvin's later years were overshadowed by an acrimonious dispute with Joachim Westphal (1510-1574), a Lutheran theologian who saw Calvin's teaching as a further deviation from biblical truth. The eventful history of

Lutheran and Reformed relations seemed about to reach a happy conclusion in the early 19th century, when King Frederick William of Prussia issued a manifesto on the anniversary of the Reformation in 1817, calling on the Protestant communities to unite. The call was not only greeted with enthusiasm but widely followed. Unions took place. But at the same time they were accompanied in many places by a hardening of attitudes and the reaffirmation of confessional positions. The arguments over the common worship book for the united churches added fuel to the fire - and the confessional traditions survived. Indeed they were consolidated with the formation of world associations, first Reformed (1875) and later, Lutheran (1947). Different as these were in conception, they nevertheless constituted international institutions which, amongst other things, officialized the respective confessional identities.

Did the vote at Leuenberg mean that, after 450 years, the decisive step had at last been taken? The mood at the time was sceptical. But, looking back over the past 25 years, it is fair to say that the agreement has stood the first test. While it has not brought about any spectacular changes in relations between the two traditions, the fellowship between the participating churches has clearly been steadily deepened. The Lutheran, Reformed and United churches in Europe *have* drawn closer together and the agreement has also had effects in other continents. While there is no saying that the traditions may not again drift apart, the last 25 years nonetheless represent something like the beginnings of a common tradition.

How did the agreement come about? What are its strengths and limits? What questions does it leave open and what are the tasks facing the churches participating in the agreement today? Allow me, if you will, to offer a few thoughts in the light of my personal memories.¹

● **A fresh start**

In the summer of 1962, Hans-Heinrich Harms, then a staff member of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, later Bishop of Oldenburg, asked me if I would be willing to take over

responsibility for organizing the Lutheran-Reformed conversations that had been going on for a number of years. At the meeting of the WCC Central Committee in Davos (1955), Lutheran and Reformed members had requested that an opportunity should be provided through the Commission on Faith and Order for a bilateral theological exchange of views between the two traditions. Theological meetings had been taking place for five years, first in Amoldshain and then at Liebfrauenberg near Strasbourg. Various subjects had been dealt with and several reports had been prepared, notably a series of theses on the meaning of baptism. Harms had been responsible for these meetings. As he was then about to leave the World Council he was looking for someone to take over from him. Harms was not sure of the prospects of these talks. He told me that they were not a WCC priority but that a meeting between the two Reformation traditions would only have some chance of success if it took place within the framework of the WCC. I was inexperienced, having only just joined the staff of the World Council. But I soon realized that talks of the kind held from 1956 to 1960 were unlikely to produce tangible results. They lacked a clearly defined goal and, above all, they had no roots in the life of the churches taking part. They suffered from the Reformation churches' old malady of expecting joint theological statements to produce far-reaching consequences. Theology as a kind of *opus operatum*. The conversations

had focussed on theological reflection, exchange and understanding, but no thought had been given to building in a process of reception.

I consulted the general secretaries of the WCC and the two world bodies. Still more important, however, was a series of conversations I had with Max Geiger, professor of systematic theology at the University of Basel. He immediately took up the project with his usual enthusiasm and his role in the genesis of the agreement can hardly be overestimated. He subsequently took on the co-presidency for the Reformed side and became the driving force behind the undertaking. With his infectious humour he was often able to unblock difficult situations and he had a particular talent for breaking out of complicated thought processes and drawing out the simple, fundamental questions that really mattered. He also had a sharp eye for particular sensitivities, be they Lutheran, Reformed or simply common to theologians as a breed. All the meetings were held in the vicinity of his home so we had plenty of opportunities for personal and family contacts. Whenever problems arose, the telephone would ring between Geneva and Tenniken in the region of Basel.

It was agreed to make a new start. In 1963 a small meeting was convened to evaluate the results of the previous conversations and to define the goal and methods of the new project (March 15-17 1963, at the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey). Four representatives from each side, plus the theological secretaries of the two world associations took part. All were agreed that the new round of conversations had to produce concrete results, that they had to be as binding as possible and that they should lead to an explicit theological consensus on the central differences. To ensure that the talks did not get bogged down in endless discussions, papers would be prepared in advance of the meetings. It was agreed to involve the churches as widely as possible from the start and to present any agreement reached to the churches at the appropriate time for their approval and comments.

I still vividly remember the last hour of this meeting. The moderator asked the participants who would be taking part in further conversations. Most of them indicated their willingness to do so, with the exception of Peter Brunner, professor of systematic theology in Heidelberg, a prominent Lutheran, who asked to be excused. He wished the enterprise God's blessing, but insisted that a real breakthrough could only be achieved if it were possible to formulate the central core of the gospel in a common confession. In his view, the drafting of such a text was an impossible endeavour in the present context. The fact that he subsequently felt able to approve the agreement was one of the great surprises and says much for Brunner's intellectual and spiritual openness.

● **The course of the discussions**

The negotiations covered a period of almost exactly ten years and fall into three phases:

a) From 1964 to 1967 theological talks were held in Bad Schauenburg, an old-fashioned health resort in the mountains near Basel. A group of theologians met four times to examine theological topics which were considered as controversial. Four series of theses were presented to the churches for their comments in 1967 - on God's word and God's presence, on the law, on the confession of faith, and on the boundaries of the church.²

b) The responses were encouraging enough for us to envisage a new

round of conversations, focusing this time on the question of how fellowship could be established between the two traditions on the basis of the theological consensus that had been obtained. What divides us? What more is needed for the two churches to be able to recognize one another fully as the church of Jesus Christ? "Church fellowship and church division" was the theme chosen for these new conversations in 1969-1970. To give the conversations greater authority, the churches were asked to appoint official delegates. A new conference centre had recently been opened at Leuenberg near Basel. This architecturally handsome centre was an ideal place to hold meetings. so the next round of conversations was shifted there. It was in this second phase that the idea of jointly elaborating an "Agreement (Concordia) between the Churches of the Reformation" was first proposed. The report on church fellowship and separation was sent to all churches for their reaction in 1970.³ They were expressly asked to urge the WCC and the two confessional world bodies to "take in hand the preparations for the drafting of an agreement". Of the 88 churches addressed, as many as 71 replied and most gave their approval, or at least their go-ahead.

c) Work on drafting the text could thus begin. In the spring of 1971 a small subcommittee prepared a first draft which was then discussed point by point by the full "assembly" in the autumn. The result was again submitted to the churches and a new version prepared, taking account of the many responses. In the spring of 1973 the decisive second assembly could at last be held.

● **Four building blocks of the agreement**

How did the result of 1973 become possible? The chief reason undoubtedly is that, over the years, the fellowship between the two traditions had gradually come to be accepted as natural and there was little understanding for their separation, especially in the local parishes. Lutheran and Reformed churches were actively involved in the ecumenical movement. In their discussions with other traditions they were frequently reminded of how close they were to one another. Could they in all conscience allow the separation to continue? Despite the presence on both sides of forces that resisted what they considered hasty ecumenical responses and solutions, union was nonetheless in the air.

Yet the negotiations could still have failed. Important here were the methodological decisions taken at crucial moments. Let me mention four examples:

a) At the very first meeting it was suggested that, rather than concentrating solely on overcoming the theological differences, the group should attempt to produce a *joint presentation* of the current situation in the Lutheran, Reformed and United churches in Europe. Again and again during the conversations it became clear that the participants had only a vague notion of one another's tradition. Who are we? Why are we as we are today? The participants from Germany in particular had an almost irrepressible tendency to judge the Reformation tradition in Europe by the situation in their own country. Delegates from other countries were welcomed, but were not really taken seriously. But how could an agreement ever take root if the partners scarcely knew one another? For this reason it was decided in the first session to prepare a joint self-portrait. I was given the task of preparing a first draft. The text was discussed twice and amended in the light of the discussions. Neither my first draft nor the final version was a masterpiece, but the process sparked

off by the document was extremely important for the subsequent course of the talks. It compelled participants not to let themselves be guided by what they imagined to be Lutheran and Reformed identity but to look on each other as partners, as they were today, and to take one another seriously. In a sense the report brought the conversations down to earth.

b) The second example is the term "agreement" itself. It was certainly not clear from the start that the task of the conversations might be to formulate an "agreement". If I remember rightly, the suggestion was first made by Professor Joachim Staedtke, of Erlangen, in the second phase of the conversations, and it was immediately accepted. An "agreement" would meet a number of requirements at once. First, it meant there was no question of establishing fellowship between the separate traditions by formulating a new confession of faith. Rather, it was a matter of testifying to the central core of the gospel in such a way that the existing confessions on both sides could be seen as witnessing to the same truth. To put it metaphorically, the individual confessions are the like strings of the instrument and the agreement is the bow which produces the harmony. By witnessing to the core of the gospel, it could create a space for common witness and service by the churches of the Reformation. It pressed the participating churches to move forward together on a common path. The idea of an agreement was linked from the beginning with a proposal for ongoing doctrinal talks that would allow for a regular review of the agreement reached and enable the participating churches together to tackle new challenges. It identified the common ground that was essential for mutual recognition, but without closing the door on new insights and developments.

c) Another important building block was the proposal to work specifically on the doctrinal condemnations pronounced by both sides in the past and to declare them as "not applying today". Marc Lienhard was given the task of drawing up a report summarizing the condemnations by which, over the centuries, Lutherans and Reformed had marked themselves off from one another. The situation was almost surrealistic - this was a discussion about condemnations that meant nothing in the minds of the participants. A systematic theologian with solid historical knowledge had to be called in to remind them of what was involved. Yet the exercise did prove useful. Mutual recognition became possible once it could be shown that the anathemas which had once caused and sealed the separation no longer created an obstacle today. The explanations about the condemnations lent the agreement historical depth.

d) Fourth and last, there was the legal aspect of what the new fellowship might imply in terms of church law. The agreement was more than a theological consensus. The declaration of church fellowship made possible by it had inevitable consequences for the legal form of the church. It was made clear from the outset that acceptance of the agreement did not mean union. Organizational consequences might be drawn from it where these were required for the sake of witness, but there was no compulsion to do so. Nonetheless, there were many legal questions to be clarified. To what extent did the agreement affect the validity of the confessions of faith currently in force? What were the consequences of fellowship in the Lord's Supper?

What were the implications of the mutual recognition of ordination and ministries? For a long time such questions were left aside. In the latter stages some of the participants became concerned that, even once approved, the projected agreement could still run aground on the "considerations" of church lawyers. We therefore proposed that a number of experts should take part in the conversations, and legal opinions were

requested. To forestall possible criticisms, especially of the last chapter of the agreement, I undertook to convene a small consultation of church lawyers immediately before the final assembly in 1973. The argumentations prepared by them were useful and much appreciated in the days that followed and also since. Olav Lingner, an Oberkirchenrat in the church in Berlin, was of particular assistance in these discussions.

● **The ratification of the agreement**

At no stage did the conversations attract much public attention. They were regularly reported in the church press, but interest was never high. Other themes dominated the agenda in the sixties and seventies. To many people, the theological work done at Schauenburg and Leuenberg seemed to belong to a by-gone era. At the World Council of Churches itself the conversations were regarded as outdated in their method. The current view at the time was that church unity could only come about in the context of practical action in the contemporary world.

The low level of interest can, however, also be explained in part by the attitude of the participants themselves, especially on the Lutheran side. They insisted that the consensus achieved would have to convince by its own inherent quality. To try to give it more weight by any kind of "outward display" was spiritually illegitimate. When the first round of talks was about to end in 1967, I made several suggestions for giving publicity to the results of the talks, but these met with immovable opposition, in particular from the Lutheran co-president, Leonard Goppelt. In the end it was agreed to hold a joint service with the Church of Basel. Wolfgang Trillhaas from Gottingen gave a splendid sermon before a small congregation. No representatives of the press, radio or television were invited.

Even the conclusion of the conversations went relatively unnoticed. Everything was very low-key. The participants went home and left it to the offices in Geneva to submit the agreement to the churches for ratification.

The responses came back quite quickly. Within a year, a sizeable number of churches had assented to the agreement and deposited their signature with the World Council of Churches. The result has

been remarkable. Of the many bilateral talks held in the past decades, the Lutheran-Reformed dialogue is, to the best of my knowledge, the only one which has not only led to full mutual recognition, but has also been expressly ratified by the participating churches. Today, the fellowship between the Reformation traditions is a natural and accepted thing. Even the Nordic Lutheran churches, which did not feel able to give their official assent to the agreement, are today actively involved in the continuing doctrinal conversations.

The tensions that surrounded the talks have, however, left their mark on the reception process in the years that followed. While hopes were regularly expressed that the churches would gradually move towards fellowship in witness and service, any concrete plans for common initiatives were greeted with utmost scepticism and reserve. Here and there relations between Lutherans and Reformed have been changed by the agreement. Wherever a reordering of relations was necessary in any case for other reasons, the agreement has been gratefully received and used. But in many countries the situation has remained essentially unchanged. Common witness by the Reformation churches Europe-wide is still in its infancy.

On closer inspection a certain asymmetry can be seen in the process of reception. The two sides did not approach the agreement in exactly the same perspective. On the Reformed side assent was generally given with great matter-of-factness. Why not leave this division behind us - it's long out-dated in any case, was often the attitude. On the Lutheran side the text was in most cases minutely inspected. In individual churches, notably the Lutheran Church of Bavaria, assent was given only after lengthy and protracted debates. The same asymmetry appeared in the continuing doctrinal talks. On the Reformed side, participants were anxious to get down as quickly as possible to examining current issues together. The agreement was welcomed as opening the way for moving forward together. On the Lutheran side interest focused more on the controversial issues of doctrine in the strict sense of the word. The subsequent doctrinal talks should serve to verify and expand the established consensus. The difference in approach became tangible when, at the end of the seventies, it was proposed in the continuation committee that there should be a debate on Protestant witness and the future of Europe. The proposal was rejected. A discussion of this nature was deemed inappropriate for the fellowship made possible by the agreement; in any case, some said, the time was not ripe for entering the arena of political witness.

I believe this tension has still not been fully resolved even today.

● **European and universal?**

The agreement opened the way for fellowship among the Lutheran, Reformed and United churches in *Europe*. What consequences did it have for relations among the traditions worldwide? Here too, a tension was evident from the outset. On the one hand, it was clear that the agreement did not have universal validity - it had been worked out by European theologians and approved by European churches. It would have been arrogant to expect churches in other continents simply to adhere to it. If fellowship were to come about, it would have to be as a result of processes of their own. Yet on the other hand it was equally clear that the declaration of church fellowship in Europe could not but have consequences in the rest of the world. To say the least, the ratification of the agreement in Europe was a challenge to Lutheran and Reformed churches everywhere.

A first result beyond the confines of Europe was the assent given to the agreement by the Evangelical Church of the Rio de la Plata in Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay. Still more important, however, is the agreement between the Lutheran church and three Reformed churches in the United States, which was ratified last year. Lutheran-Reformed conversations started in the United States many years ago. The first meetings took place in the sixties, parallel to the conversations at Bad Schauenburg. In 1966 the report "Marburg Revisited" appeared, expressing the view that "no insurmountable obstacles to pulpit and table fellowship" existed between the churches,⁴ but this was not taken further for many years. A second round of talks was started in the seventies (1972-1974), but it was not until the third round at the beginning of the eighties that tangible results began to be achieved. In 1986 the churches were asked to respond to an "Invitation to Action".⁵ Several stages, which I shall not describe in detail here, led finally to the "Formula of Agreement" which laid the foundations for full mutual recognition between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and three Reformed churches.

On October 4 1998, a solemn service was held in Chicago to confirm the agreement, with services also being held simultaneously in the local

congregations of the churches involved, to celebrate this mutual recognition.

Twenty-five years after the adoption of the Leuenberg Agreement a decisive and important step has thus been taken in the direction of universal fellowship between the Lutheran and Reformed churches. An act of reconciliation has taken place not just in Europe, but also in America. The Leuenberg Agreement has been confirmed by the Formula of Agreement. Communion between the churches has been expanded and strengthened. The churches belonging to the Leuenberg Agreement have every reason to celebrate the Formula of Agreement worked out by their sister churches in the United States.

First signs seem to indicate that the communion among the Reformation churches could spread beyond the boundaries of the Lutheran, Reformed and United churches and the pre-Reformation churches related to them. By a separate agreement, the Evangelical-Methodist churches in Europe joined the church fellowship brought about by the Leuenberg Agreement a few years ago. How far this step will also have effects in other parts of the world remains to be seen.

● **Twenty-five years on - remaining obstacles and new perspectives**

Let me conclude with some thoughts on what might be the next steps. Four aspects are of particular concern to me:

a) Feeding the Reformation approach into the ecumenical movement

As we have seen, the Lutheran-Reformed conversations are among the few bilateral dialogues where church fellowship has not only been proposed but actually ratified. Why has this result not had more far-reaching consequences? The explanation is to be found in the ecumenical movement itself. The early seventies were probably the last moment at which the Lutheran-Reformed conversations could still be brought to a successful conclusion. A few years later an agreement between the churches of the Reformation would have encountered far stronger opposition. A strange development took place in those years. There was a growing fascination with new relations with the Roman Catholic Church. In the Lutheran World Federation in particular, priority was being given almost exclusively to the dialogue with Rome. The fellowship among the churches of the Reformation was of course still basically welcomed, but at the same time it was felt to be a complication. If the dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church was to be conducted on the basis of Lutheran confessional criteria, the challenge of the Leuenberg Agreement had to be kept within limits. Warnings were reiterated about unacceptable bloc-building in the Protestant camp. A strange kind of "ecumenically justified immobility" has resulted. Again and again the realization of fellowship with Reformation partners is postponed in the name of a supposedly wider ecumenical fellowship. Instead of putting into practice the fellowship possible here and now among the Protestant churches, the status quo is left in place in the name of an as yet unattainable fellowship.

One of the urgent tasks is to clarify the relation between the fellowship emerging from the Leuenberg Agreement and the wider ecumenical fellowship. What does the common approach of the Reformation, which links Lutherans and Reformed, mean for the encounter with other church traditions? How can they together bring this to bear in the ecumenical

movement? The agreement expresses the hope that the mutual recognition by the Reformation churches will bring movement in the ecumenical movement. Clearly, the participating churches have not yet given sufficient thought to the ecumenical potential of the Leuenberg Agreement.

b) New communication strategies

With the conclusion of the agreement in the United States a new stage has been reached and it is important to raise the churches' awareness of its significance. For this signs and symbols are needed. It is an illusion to think that theological texts speak to the people in our local congregations. The communion that exists between the churches of the Reformation has to be experienced as a reality .

Close cooperation between the authorities in Europe and the United States is called for in order to raise awareness of communion.

c) Cooperation between the world bodies must be systematically developed

So far, the fellowship made possible by the Leuenberg Agreement has had little effect on the orientation of the two world bodies and their way of working. At the international level in Geneva they are fond of pointing out that the agreement has only regional significance. Talks have taken place intermittently and an international dialogue actually got under way in the eighties. The report of the joint commission (1990) stressed the need for closer and more intensive working relations between the two bodies (para 90),⁶ but such recommendations have remained largely a dead letter. The broadening of mutual recognition has created a new situation in this respect also. If the two world bodies really want to be representative of their member churches, they cannot go on working as though the goal of a fellowship of witness and service had never been declared. Of course, the two organizations differ from one another in size, goals and conception. The Lutheran World Federation, with its ample staff and resources, stands in contrast to the humble World Alliance of Reformed Churches, constantly struggling for survival. When the meetings to work out the agreement were being held, staff members did not travel to them together. They went their separate ways at the station, the Lutherans travelling first class while the Reformed made do with second. In Geneva it is always said that the two organizations are incompatible. Is this really true? Of course cooperation cannot come into existence overnight, but it can be built up gradually. Common themes can be identified. Common initiatives can be set up. On the basis of concrete projects common ways of working can be developed. If cooperation is to be developed at all the first steps must be taken now.

It would be helpful if the two world bodies were to set up a joint working group now to review possible areas of cooperation.

d) The place of the united churches needs to be re-examined

United churches occupy a special place in the ecumenical movement today. The united churches in Germany belong to the WCC but not to either of the confessional bodies. The Lutheran World Federation has some member churches that are actually united churches (e.g. Mekhane Jesu Church in Ethiopia, Basel Mission Church in North Borneo) and the same is true of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (e.g. The Evangelical Church of the Czech Brethren). The (united) Evangelical Church of the Rio de la Plata is a member of both organizations. Both world bodies are basically open to

united churches, the Lutheran World Federation for the last few years, the Reformed Alliance for several decades, but the role of the united churches has never been clarified in either of the organizations. What does their membership mean for the world bodies? Are they simply tolerated as an anomaly? Or can they act as bridge between the two organizations? In the new situation created by the Formula of Agreement these questions are unavoidable.

Could we envisage according united churches a special status in and between the two world organizations?

Will we be able to deal successfully with these challenges in the years ahead or will we simply continue along our traditional tracks despite all the progress in mutual relations? Will the Leuenberg Agreement continue to be of value as an instrument of fellowship? We are not in a position to answer these questions with any certitude. The dead-weight of the traditions might still prevail. Counter-currents still cannot be ruled out. But we still have more than enough reason to be grateful for all that has been achieved in the first 25 years since the agreement was reached. Many of the people involved then have since died. Those who are still alive belong the older generation. Does this mean the agreement too has grown older and frailer? For the future much will depend on whether a new generation steps forward to make use of this instrument and continue the work of building church fellowship.

Originally published in *Rowing in One Boat*, John Knox Series no.11 (Geneva: JKIRC, 1999), pp.9-23.

Notes

1. The course of the conversations has been presented by Elisabeth Schieffer, a Catholic theologian, in a comprehensive and carefully-researched volume entitled *Von Schauenberg nach Leuenberg, Entstehung und Bedeutung der Konkordie reformatorischer Kirchen in Europa*, Paderborn 1983. The book is reliable, and persons interested in the details of the process will find whatever they are looking for. As the author was not involved in the talks herself and relied entirely on the written material stored in various archives, the picture she paints is inevitably a little lifeless in some places.
2. *Auf dem Weg. Lutherisch-reformierte Kirchengemeinschaft*, Reports and Papers compiled and published by the Secretariat for Faith and Order, Polis 33, Zurich 1967.
3. *Gemeinschaft der reformatorischen Kirchen. Auf dem Weg II*, Polis 41, Zurich 1967.
4. Paul C Empie and James I McCord (ed), *Marburg Revisited*, Minneapolis, 1966.
5. James E Andrews and Joseph A Burgess (ed), *An Invitation to Action*, Philadelphia, 1984.
6. LWF/WARC, *Towards Church Fellowship*, Report of the Joint Commission between the Lutheran World Federation and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, Geneva, 1990.