THE LEUENBERG DOCUMENT
“CHURCH - PEOPLE - STATE - NATION”
A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

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Since the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe and the resurgence of nationalism in Europe, the relationship between ecclesiological and national identity has been put again on the ecumenical agenda. At the moment Faith and Order, the theological commission of the World Council of Churches is preparing a study on Ethnic Identity, National Identity, and the Unity of the Church as part of the ecclesiological reflection on the local expression of the universal church. Meanwhile the Protestant Churches gathered in the Leuenberg Church Fellowship (LCF) have not been waiting for the results of this study and have already published their own findings on this issue. The fifth General Assembly of LCF in Belfast 19-25 June 2001 adopted the study-document Church - People - State - Nation. It is hardly surprising that they have been conducting their own investigation on this topic, because Reformation Churches are traditionally divided along national lines. This article presents the content of that study and evaluates its results in order to be of help for the continuing ecumenical studies on the relationship church-people-nation-state.

1. Leuenberg and the Discussion on Church-People-State and Nation

The Leuenberg Church Fellowship is based on the Agreement between the Reformation Churches in Europe, which was drafted from 12 to 16 March 1973. Leuenberg, near Basle, gave its name to the Agreement (Leuenberg Agreement or LA) and to the Fellowship that originated out of it. The text

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1 Nationalism was an important topic at the conferences of the emerging ecumenical movement before the Second World War, especially at the Life and Work conference in Oxford (1937) and at the meeting of the International Missionary Council in Tambaram (1938).

2 In the first half of 2002 LCF counts 103 member churches. Often their names do not only reveal their belonging to a specific confession, but also their relation to a nation-state (e.g. the Reformed Christian Church in Croatia, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark, Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church ...), a region (Église de la Confession d’Augsburg d’ Alsace et de la Lorraine, Evangelische Landeskirche Anhalts, Church of Scotland ...) and languages (Evangelische Synode deutscher Sprache im Vereinigten Königreich, German speaking Evangelical Church in Greece).
of 1973 was the result of a process of dialogue mainly between Lutheran and Reformed Churches that started after the Second World War, originally at a national level, since the mid-fifties at a European level. In adopting this Agreement Protestant churches admitted that they no longer had theological grounds for refusing church fellowship to one another and so ended over 450 years of church division in Europe. The signatory churches grant one another pulpit and table fellowship and commit themselves to common witness and service on the basis of the Agreement. At present over 100 churches belong to the fellowship, not only Reformation churches such as Lutheran, Reformed, United, Methodist, Hussite churches but also pre-Reformation churches such as the Waldensian Church and the Church of the Czech Brethren. It consists not only of European Churches, but also of South American Churches emanating from the earlier immigration churches. Some became members through signing the Agreement, others also through a 'Joint Declaration of Church Fellowship' as in the case of seven Methodist churches. Working contacts exist with the Anglican Communion and with the European Baptist Federation. A General Assembly takes place about every six years, in which basic outlines for future work and new subjects for theological conversation are determined and a new Executive Committee is elected. LCF understands itself as a step towards the unity of the universal church of Jesus Christ in reconciled diversity. The Fellowship serves to promote the unity and the community of the Protestant churches through joint theological doctrinal discussions and represents the positions of the Reformation churches on important spiritual and social challenges.

At the Belfast Conference in the summer of 2001 under the title Reconciled Diversity - The Mission of the Protestant Churches in Europe three major doctrinal discussions were presented: on Church and Israel, on Church-People-State-Nation and on Law and Gospel. These three themes were chosen by the members of the fourth General Assembly in Vienna in 1994. It is not difficult to imagine why they opted for the second topic. At that time, 1994, the renewed outbreak of nationalistic conflicts in Central and Southeast Europe, in the aftermath of the political turning point of 1989, was at its height. In 1995 the Executive Committee of the LCF entrusted the South and Southeast Europe Regional Group with the commission to undertake this study. This group, which was founded more than 25 years ago against the background of the continuing East/West conflict, aimed at fellowship of witness and service through encounter and joint theological work. Between 1995 and 1999 representatives of Protestant churches from Austria (3), the Czech Republic (3), Denmark (1), the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1), France (0), Germany (15), Hungary (3), Italy (1), the

3 The numbers between the brackets refer to the number of participants per country according to the list of members of the South and Southeast Europe Regional Group between 1995-2000 (Appendix B, p. 48-50).