

## Press Release n. 3

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# Ambassadors of reconciliation and signs of hope

## Ecumenical network *Together for Europe* celebrated its anniversary in the Augsburg city hall

In Augsburg's city hall, every seat in the room was filled - 300 members from 55 Christian communities and movements from various churches and from 25 European countries were gathered this Saturday to celebrate several important anniversaries: 30 years ago the Berlin Wall fell and a new era of encounter between East and West began for Europe. 20 years ago the 'Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification' was signed by representatives of the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church. And on the same day in the afternoon, the first group of leaders from various catholic, evangelical and free church backgrounds came together in Ottmaring - this was when the network *Together for Europe* was born. Those three events were closely linked for the people present and shaped the 'pioneering spirit' of the initiative.

'You are ambassadors of reconciliation', encouraged Lutheran Bishop, Ret., Christian Krause. He had co-signed the 'Joint Declaration' in 1999 as the then President of the Lutheran World Federation. As one of the witnesses at the time he recalled the many encouraging steps that have been taken in ecumenism through the declaration and since it was made. In the current climate of increasing scepticism of Europe and political polarization, it is precisely this experience of reconciled diversity of the movements and spiritual communities that is needed.

Bertram Meier, the current diocesan administrator in Augsburg, emphasised in the conversation with his Evangelical colleague Regional Bishop Axel Piper the importance of this ability to seek reconciliation. 'Unity in diversity is also a challenge within the church. It's about learning to understand each other, not just from the mind, but also from the heart.' Piper confirmed that it is exactly this effort that also shapes the ecumenical relations in Augsburg: 'But we must remain curious towards each other, we have to be interested in each other, because we can learn a lot from each other!'

Concrete approaches for the implementation of this relational network became visible in the short, colourful testimonies from various European countries: In Hungary it moves Christians from different denominations to reach out to people in need and isolation together, even in the transition camps for refugees. In Austria, members of different communities are encouraged to step over their own borders and to seek contact with Christians in Slovenia and Italy and to work together to meet the needs of their respective regions. A look to Switzerland showed how regional groups in the network of *Together for Europe* are promoting a new passion for active involvement IN Europe.

Next, Gerhard Pross, moderator of the ecumenical network, outlined perspectives for the future: it would be important to resist the temptation to develop new organizational structures, but instead to deepen the subject of reconciliation. In the current climate of disappointment, the loss of credibility of the churches, and the lack of a spirit of optimism, there would be a great opportunity to witness the positive experiences between ministry and charisma, between church leadership and charismatic expressions of faith in the movements. ‘In times of divergence and tendencies towards demarcation we want to be a prophetic sign for a credible togetherness in Europe.’

In the afternoon, the Czech Senator Pavel Fischer made an important contribution to the socio-political dimension of *Together for Europe*. He described a current picture of the commitment to freedom and human dignity in the context of a strongly media-influenced society in Europe. He urged his audience to become active citizens who have the courage to stand up for others, for the weak, to speak out for justice. Christians in Europe can help make the variety of voices audible and the many different facets of a theme visible.

There was also plenty of room in the afternoon for hearing about the diverse lives of the communities in the network, in each country and region. Engaged members of the network reported prayer initiatives and pilgrimage paths for peace, for greater understanding and reconciliation. A colourful media contribution showed commitment in many countries on 9 May: The annual Europe Day has become a special occasion for the presence of *Together for Europe* in the public eye. There were also reports of a group of Germans travelling to Ukraine, and an initiative of Christians and Muslims in France showed the diversity and breadth of social engagement.

At the end of the day, Father Heinrich Walter from the Schoenstatt Movement concluded: ‘Europe needs this positive spirit, because there are already enough messengers of doom!’ Afterwards, the group made its way from the city hall to the Protestant church of St. Anna, where in 1999 the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification had been signed. There the day ended with ecumenical prayer and a candlelight procession. On the square in front of the church, the anniversary celebrations were concluded with songs and a blessing.

Further information about the event and printable photos for free use at [www.together4europe.org](http://www.together4europe.org)

The initiative *Together for Europe* initiative is an international network of more than 300 Christian movements and communities from across Europe. It was founded in 1999 and connects Protestant, Catholic, Anglican and Orthodox Christians as well as members of free churches and new communities. 70 communities meet as the ‘Friends of *Together for Europe*’.