

A study programme for Theobalt

An informal discussion, in connection with a bien meeting held in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Vilnius.

Saturday the 26th of October 2002

Participants from Theobalt is Rev Mette Trankjær from Danske Folkekirken, Bishop Rimantas Norvila of the Roman Catholic Church in Lithuania and Rev Ragnar Svenserud from the Church of Sweden. Invited to the discussion are some bien representatives from the Catholic tradition, the Russian Orthodox tradition and the Evangelical Lutheran tradition.

The discussion takes its starting point in two documents; “A Theobalt programme for dialogue and studies” and “A study programme for Theobalt – some introducing reflections”.

Terminology and delimitations

The steering group meeting in St. Petersburg earlier this year discussed some of the keywords from the Theobalt V conference in June 2001. The keywords were Communication and Education.

The term education has proven to pose problems for the network as it means different things in the different traditions. For Catholics and Orthodox believers education is considered one-sided and formative. Using it in the ecumenical sphere suggests aiming for syncretism. Instead the terms studies and study programme were introduced. The discussion group suggested the terms dialogue and communication to be used as parallels. At the same time it is noted that there is a danger of losing focus when these terms are used exclusively.

In the discussion group it is said that a study programme about values, human relations, culture and historical heritage probably is acceptable for all traditions.

The term ecumenism has also some difficulties attached to it. For the Orthodox Church, taking part in ecumenical action is not easy. For individual orthodox Christians it is another matter.

One of the group members stated that ecumenical work always should have two directions; one academic, held on a serious theological level between church leaders, one on an individual level between representatives from different traditions. Here there is no need for theological depth. These two directions call for different behaviour.

Dean Svenserud, chief administrator for the network gives an outline of one of the basic ideas in Theobalt. No Church can be forced to participate in such a way that it is untrue to its own tradition.

What is the purpose of implementing a study programme?

So far it has been said that within the Theobalt network the general conferences every three or four years should carry on as before. The aim is that between and beside these there should be a more regular programme with more reciprocal communication and a more popular level. To organise these seminars, consultations and meetings, different locations should be chosen.

Despite the differences between, and within the three Christian traditions in the Baltic area it was stated at the steering group meeting in January 2002 that we all deal with similar problems. Examples of these are secularisation, the loss of interest among young people, materialism, decreasing knowledge of the Bible and a general view of the Church as a service institution.

The fact that there is great diversity among the traditions offers something valuable to the Baltic area. A reference is made to Corinthians chapter 12. What we are striving for is to find unity in our diversity.

The Christian Churches have contributed strongly to the societies in the nations around the Baltic Sea. It is still the aim and goal of the Churches to contribute to a good life and positive development. This aim could be a starting point for a study programme. The goal for such a study programme can not be a definite result but a process of influencing individuals, groups and eventually societies.

It has been stated that all that is done with in the frame of Theobalt should have a Baltic dimension and take into consideration the preamble of Theobalt, formulated as follows: Theobalt is a network among churches around the Baltic Sea

- to further mutual understanding and strengthen relations between the three main Christian traditions
- to develop the contribution of churches to the life and culture of the nations and to the protection of the environment
- to promote Christian values, reconciliation, democracy and peace.

The Theobalt network is a loose structure of communication without hierarchies. The question is put to the group if it is right for an organism like this to work with a study programme. Will it not be too ambitious, too difficult to carry through?

The response from the group to this is that the ambitions should not be too high at the on set. To organise a context where people from the area can communicate, meet and get to know each other better should not be impossible. In time the idea can develop. The first steps can be very small and modest.

Potential

To offer meeting points and communication within the area can provide the network with the possibility of making a significant difference in the long run. Through personal contacts between individuals in the different traditions, prejudice can be overcome and respect and confidence is won. This effect cannot be planned, it comes through personal meetings.

We shouldn't be afraid of small plans, it is how great things start. Bishop Norvila who has been active in the Theobalt for many years contributes to this statement by looking back on the years that have gone by since the network came into being. In his experience a lot has happened between the people who have taken part in the work of Theobalt. He goes on to say that within the network the goal must always be to stay firm in your own tradition. Even when this is said it is still possible to grow together. Our common task is to keep the process going. In each new project within the network we should always start in this – to get to know each other more!

Another participant in the group states that dialogue is very important between Christians, as there is so much hostility, violence and prejudice in society. A living dialogue could be a way of changing the course of development. Building bridges between individual Christians means building bridges between Churches. The Churches have a special mission to bring peace to the area. This can be done through bridge building – by increasing knowledge, understanding and communication.

Problems

One problem for a study programme, which is mentioned, is the fear of syncretism, that the result of the programme would be creating a new-fashioned faith. Mixed religion is of course not the aim of the programme but the degree of maturity in the participant's faith is a vital factor. It is also said that the lecturers/teachers should be secure and recognised within their tradition. If the Churches in the area accept the study programme a lot has been won.

One problem for the study programme could be that there are several Evangelical Lutheran Churches in the area, a few branches of the Orthodox Church and one Catholic Church, presenting itself in several countries. In Theobalt there are representatives of the three main Church traditions. Even the smallest Lutheran Church in the area is invited to take part, side by side with the large Russian Orthodox Church for instance.

To overcome the problems that we are facing it is said that patience is needed and Christian love. We must show respect for our fellow Christians and have a sincere desire to understand each other.

The financing of the study programme is too big a problem to discuss in this forum but it is said that the churches should all try to share the responsibility of meeting the costs. To keep down costs it may be interesting to explore other forms of communication.

Participants

It is said that in a programme for studies and dialogue it is important to distinguish between two levels; the academic level and the individual sharing. It is also discussed if the participants should be taking part as individuals or as official representatives of their churches.

It is agreed upon that a small-scale study programme, staged in an area with local representation from all the three traditions, with technical support through the Internet and held on an unofficial level is an acceptable concept. It is noted that in the Orthodox tradition as well as in the Catholic it is not possible or appropriate for an individual to take part in such a venture without the blessing of a bishop.

The difference between a general conference and a study programme is discussed. The conference is a one-occasion affair. The programme should be continuous, with a group of people with some constancy.

It is said that the Church leaders in the area always should be involved.

The study programme should reach out to a broader group than those who take part in the general conferences. The group could consist of Christian people in general and that the target group could be students of Theology and young Christian professionals, over 25 years of age and living in the closeness of their parishes. The group concludes that choosing young professionals means to use the long-term perspective. In ten or twenty years time these people will be the leaders in their parishes and churches.

It is said that information about the study programme can be given through the Churches by way of the leaders and the faculties. There could also be an invitation on the Theobalt homepage. The contact persons for Theobalt and the bien network could be asked to spread the information.

Practise

A name for the study programme is discussed: Baltic Institute of Intercultural and Ecumenical Communication, BIIEC.

One important issue that is mentioned during the discussion is keeping and maintaining the Christian subculture. How do we keep Christian identity alive within our parishes? What does it mean to be a Christian in contemporary society? A challenging aspect of this is the influence of western culture on eastern, which at the moment is flowing into the countries on the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea.

Sharing experiences and knowledge with each other is one of the goals of the study programme. To share means that you have to know of each other's lives. One method for this that is presented to the group is to spend two weeks in a society within the area where all three Christian traditions are represented. One side of the programme would be to take part in each tradition's Christian life. The other side would be to offer the participants an academic level of lectures and discussions.

One group member gives a response to this idea by saying that to participate in each other's prayers is not a problem. To share the liturgy or Holy communion is more difficult.

The concept could be staged in a city like Vilnius where all the three traditions are present. Each tradition can demonstrate its mode of spiritual life – participation would not be obligatory. Learning by seeing would be the motto.

Another idea that is presented is to establish a Theobalt mailing list. Through it the participants could reflect and discuss theological matters. It could be arranged as an intra-net with closed access.

Yet another idea is to arrange one seminary every year with around twenty participants with a topic related to the place chosen. The people invited should be professionals within the field of the topic. The discussion should have a threefold perspective, one for each tradition. This would be a way to learn how each tradition deals with a specific problem. The topic should be concrete, contemporary and sensitive. From local level there could be participation from the municipality.

It is suggested that a programme should be set up that continues for a long period of time but where the participants meet just for a week a year in different places around the Baltic. The concrete aim would be to get to know the three traditions and the concept of ecumenism. A wider group of people could be invited for a larger conference at the start or the end of the week.

Another idea was to organise four weekend courses alternatively two-day week courses with the following topics:

What does it mean to be an Orthodox Christian?

What does it mean to be a Catholic Christian?

What does it mean to be a Lutheran Christian?

Summing up – How do we communicate with each other?

It is also pointed out that small informal meetings should precede the general conferences to reach better results.

Topics concerning the expansion of the European Union could be interesting and could also attract financing aid from the Union.

Dean Svenserud informs the group about some plans that are already taking form. There is an idea for a programme for the study of Early music, 14th – 16th centuries. It is during these times that the seedling to today's church music lies. The programme would run through several semesters. There is also a language course being planned for students from Scandinavia and Russia. The languages will be English and Russian. There is room for twenty students and the programme will be running for 2-3 weeks next summer.

Summing up

The Dean Svenserud concludes by saying that the steering group will discuss if all the Churches in the network must run the programme together and thereby support it in every detail. This will be a very complex situation to manoeuvre. Another way to go about it is that the Diocese of Visby manages the programme and offers it to the other Churches. This way, taking part and sending participants is the decision of each Church. This is how the network Theobalt came into being. To carry on managing and developing the programme, the acceptance of the other Churches is needed.