

A Message on . . .

A CHANGING EUROPE

On the evening of that day . . . Jesus came and stood among [the disciples] and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you."

From the Gospel for the Second Sunday of Easter,
John 20:19-21

Remarkable events in Central and Eastern Europe are profoundly changing our world. Largely peaceful revolutions have brought down oppressive regimes, lifted hopes for democratic rights and opened walls between East and West. The changing face of Europe offers new possibilities for peace and development. Churches, which in some situations helped shape these events, are directly affected by what is happening.

The Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America joins with all who rejoice in this flourishing of freedom, even as we recognize difficulties in the present and uncertainties in the future. We bid the congregations and members of our church to pray for the leaders, people and churches in these lands and to renew our commitment to peace. The Risen Jesus, whose living presence creates the one church, unites us with our brothers and sisters in Christ in Central and Eastern Europe. The Gospel's gift of peace empowers us for peacemaking in God's changing world.

A New Situation

1989 marks a turning point in the history of Europe. Changes in the Soviet Union's domestic and foreign policies opened the door to dramatic, unanticipated developments in Central and Eastern Europe. In Poland, Hungary, the German Democratic Republic (East Germany),

Czechoslovakia, and Romania people rose up to end totalitarian rule. Bulgaria and Yugoslavia also experienced major change. In the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania peoples' movements showed new vitality. Only Albania seemed to remain unchanged.

With the collapse of the old, a new order is beginning to emerge. Free elections signal the movement from one-party communist rule to pluralistic democracy. Countries are working on alternatives to the highly-centralized economic systems of the previous regimes. Citizen organizations are forming to respond to social and economic questions, including those relating to the environment. Both the integration of Europe and the unification of Germany are being pursued. The United States and the Soviet Union are negotiating troop and armament reductions in Europe in a post-Cold War atmosphere.

These developments present enormous, complex challenges that will test people's imagination, wisdom and patience. They point to the suffering that comes from social change and economic dislocation. In addition, explosive ethnic and nationalistic dynamics pose a continuing danger. Yet even in the midst of sobering realities, we share the hope for a better future that these events have awakened.

Churches Participate

During many years of legal restriction, harassment and repression, churches faithfully preached the Gospel and respected and nurtured human dignity. As an outgrowth of their tested witness to Jesus Christ, churches and Christians participated in and supported their countries' recent transformation. Many Lutherans, as well as Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Reformed and other Protestants, engaged in the struggle for freedom. In many places this participation was ecumenical.¹

In East Germany, for example, where largely Lutheran bodies are the dominant religious group, churches were significant actors, so much so, that some speak of "the Protestant Revolution." Through the years, these churches were openly critical of repressive policies of the government. As a free space in society, they provided a "roof" for the

gathering of the peace groups who played a decisive role in the “turning” in that country. As the meeting point for demonstrations, they set the climate for the non-violent character of the East German transformation. In the transition to a more open society, church leaders acted as mediators among the opposing political groups; some became leaders in the new political parties. As former enemies of the churches fell from power, churches demonstrated the meaning of Christian forgiveness and compassion.

Freedom for the Churches

We joyfully welcome the new religious freedom in Central and Eastern Europe. It is a universal human right that applies not only to Christians, but also to Jews, Muslims and others.

The guarantee of religious freedom gives the churches new opportunities to carry out their mission. Church buildings are being reopened, congregations are being reorganized and public social ministry is taking on new forms. Evangelization and youth education are possible on an intense scale, and Bibles and Christian literature are openly distributed and eagerly read. Church leaders and students are more readily able to secure visas to visit other countries, and in many places seminaries and other church-related institutions are attracting increasing interest and participation. We add our prayers of thanksgiving to those of the church throughout the world for the new freedom that the churches in Central and Eastern Europe enjoy.

We also welcome the continuing democratization in the Soviet Union, and in particular, President Mikhail Gorbachev’s promise to accelerate freedom-of-conscience legislation. However, we join with the Eighth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation to voice our concern that the process of opening “new avenues for religious and civil freedom and for self-determination of nations . . . has only begun and still is suppressed in the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania by the USSR.”² In the present serious situation, we pray that change in the Baltics will take place through an orderly and peaceful process of negotiation.

New Challenges for Us

As Lutherans in the United States and the Caribbean, we have much to learn from the churches in Central and Eastern Europe. Their stories of faithfulness are a vivid testimony to Christian discipleship. Their participation in their peoples' struggles prompts us to examine our own public responsibility. The resistance of workers who drew strength from their own Roman Catholic piety calls us to reflect on how our faith enables us to stand against forces of injustice. The devotion of Orthodox worshippers, whose faith was and is sustained through the drama of the liturgy, reminds us of the power of Word and Sacrament for our life together. The fervent trust that God answers prayer, demonstrated by many Christians in the East, invites us to pray with renewed confidence.

Our admiration for the courageous action of people in Central and Eastern Europe and our appreciation for their democratic revolutions stimulate us to renew and strengthen our own democratic traditions and institutions. This is a time for us boldly to examine the ways in which we and our nation can contribute to peace in this new situation. The old stereotypes and polarized attitudes of the Cold War now must give way to fresh thinking and acting that genuinely reduce the threats of war and increase global—including environmental and economic—security.

We in the Church Council commend our government's commitment to reduce troops in Europe and elsewhere and its intention to conclude conventional, chemical and nuclear weapons treaties with the Soviet Union. We are encouraged by the prospect of reduced military expenditures and by the public debate on how our institutions should respond to pressing social and environmental needs. We call upon the members of our church to continue to follow closely the events in Europe, to participate vigorously in the public discussion surrounding these events, and to support actively policies that seek a freer, more just and peaceful nation and world.

Central and Eastern European countries will need the long-term economic and political support of other countries and international

organizations in reconstructing their societies. We urge world leaders to be just and generous in their dealings with these nations. We also underscore our profound concern that renewed interest in Europe not detract from our responsibilities to address human needs and political changes in Africa, Asia and Latin America. We will work for policies to insure that improved relations with the East not be at the expense of just relations with the South. The goals of disarmament and socioeconomic development are integrally related. Progress in both areas needs to go hand-in-hand so that the grave economic disparities between the rich and the poor might be overcome.³

Living Our Unity in Christ

Where we have been indifferent to the suffering of peoples and churches in Central and Eastern Europe, may we be given new awareness of injustice and the boldness to speak out. Where we have been arrogant and self-righteous, may we be humble and self-critical. Where we have contributed to the blindness and hostility of the Cold War, may our eyes be opened and we be empowered to build bridges. Where we have fallen short, may we rely more firmly on the promise that the risen Jesus forgives, unites and renews the church.

We are grateful for those who have worked to establish and maintain contacts with the churches in Central and Eastern Europe in the difficult years since World War II. We recognize, support and participate in the vital role that the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council of Churches have played and will continue to play in bringing together Christians from East and West. We will support programmatic initiatives of these world bodies to fulfill this role.

Today our church is faced with new possibilities to build upon these relations. We have the renewed responsibility to live out our unity in Christ and to help strengthen the trust that leads to lasting peace. As part of our global awareness, we in the ELCA need to increase our knowledge of and deepen our relationships with the churches in Central and Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, including the Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Reformed churches. Our appreciation for the

distinct cultures and other religious traditions in the region needs to grow. We encourage members, congregations, synods, colleges, seminaries and other expressions of our church to explore how they can contribute to this part of our global mission.⁴

Above all, the churches of Central and Eastern Europe request our prayers as they face the new challenges of mission. They have learned well how to be the church with limited material yet significant spiritual resources. As we learn from them what it means to be faithful in such circumstances, we pledge our prayers and support to these churches at this critical time.

On this Second Sunday of Easter, we participate anew in the life-giving victory of the Resurrection. The living Lord, who identifies himself with the wounds of the cross, bestows on us the Holy Spirit and sends us forth in the world, as the Father sent him, with the message of forgiveness. Renewed by the Word and the Spirit, let us take up the challenges of our changing world, "Peace be with you."

Church Council of the ELCA
Second Sunday of Easter
April 22, 1990

The Church Council requests Bishop Herbert Chilstrom to communicate the ELCA's solidarity with the churches in Central and Eastern Europe and our desire to build mutual partnership with them. We ask that this message be sent to the churches of the Lutheran World Federation, including those in the Soviet Union, and to members of the World Council of Churches and to Roman Catholic Churches in Central and Eastern Europe.

Endnotes

1. A significant example of this ecumenical cooperation was the European phase of the World Council of Churches' conciliar process on "Justice, Peace and the

Integrity of Creation.”

2. The Eighth Assembly met in Curitiba, Brazil and adopted this resolution on February 8, 1990. The Assembly calls on “its member churches to be informed objectively about the Baltic situation; its member churches to render all possible spiritual and material assistance to the Baltic Lutheran churches; and all people of good will to support the non-violent struggle and the longing of the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian peoples for freedom and self-determination.”

3. The Commission for Church in Society will soon initiate work on a social teaching statement, “Peace in God’s Threatened World.”

4. For example, members may participate through the Companion Synods Program of the Division for Global Mission, the Peace Education Program of the Commission for Church in Society, various travel seminars, youth exchanges, ecumenical consultations, and joint service, study and action projects.

Copyright © 1990 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Produced by the Department for Studies, Commission for Church in Society. Permission is granted to reproduce this document as needed, providing each copy displays the copyright as printed above.

EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA



Copyright © 2004, 1999 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.
Produced by the Department for Studies, Division for Church in Society,
8765 West Higgins Road, Chicago, IL, 60631-4190.
Permission is granted to reproduce this document as needed provided each
copy carries the copyright notice printed above.



