

Reformed Churches of Berne, Jura and Solothurn From Accra to Grand Rapids Main focus of our work after seven years of the policy “For the Globalization of Justice”

Our Fundamental Principles

Church constitution of the Evangelical Reformed Church of Canton Bern:

“It (the Church) bears witness that the Word of God applies to all areas of public life, to state and society, economy and culture. It therefore fights against all forms of injustice and physical and spiritual hardship and their causes.” (Art. 2.4)

Church order of the Evangelical Reformed Synodial Association of Bern-Jura:

“It (the church community) is conscious of its part in the global Christian community, shares its experiences, suffering and hopes, supports its mission work and mutual interconfessional aid, and welcomes opportunities for encounters between different faiths.” (Art. 82.2)

“Through its membership in the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches, it (the church) is linked with the other churches in Switzerland and with the worldwide Christian community and takes part in their shared tasks and works. The experiences and testimonies of other churches provide a challenge and encouragement for the church’s own life.” (Art. 154.2)

Water

In the context of our policy “For the Globalization of Justice”¹ and the “Accra Confession”² we have decided to look at specific themes to try to gain a greater understanding of the mechanisms of globalization – deregulation and privatization, which suppress society’s democratic controls – and the opportunities for sustainable, just structures.

A central, exemplary focus for us has been and remains the subject of water. We arrived at the realization that water must be seen “as a human right and as a public good”, not least because of our involvement with the business dealings of the Swiss company Nestlé in Brazil. Our church gave the impetus for the declaration by the Protestant and Catholic churches of Brazil and Switzerland which bears this same title, a declaration which is now supported by many churches³. These efforts were part of the Ecumenical Water Network of the Ecumenical Council of Churches⁴.

We encourage the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Grand Rapids, as one body and as individual churches, to sign the ecumenical declaration and make the campaign for water as a human right and a public good its common task and priority in the implementation of the Accra Confession.

¹ <http://www.refbejuso.ch/publikationen/publikationen-oekumene-mission-entwicklung-oeme.html?0=>

² http://warc.jalb.de/warcajsp/side.jsp?news_id=1154&navi=45

³ www.sek-feps.ch/shop/media/gemeinsame_texte/1/1_engl.pdf

⁴ <http://www.oikoumene.org/activities/ewn-home.html>

Agriculture

We already focused on the subject of agriculture in our policy under the title "Market Dominance and Competition". Over the past years we have looked very closely at the issues regarding the production and consumption of food. Central north-south issues are directly linked to the situation of farmers in our church parishes. Throughout the world, the effects of globalization are having a strong impact on agriculture. In 2009 the number of people suffering from hunger rose to over a billion. This represents an increase of 150 million since the beginning of the current food and financial crisis. What is meant by an "economy of plenty for all"? In our parishes about 5 % of the population are employed in agriculture. They mainly work and live on small and medium-sized farms. Many of them produce in a sustainable manner and make a considerable contribution to the nurture of our countryside and culture. Small-scale farmers, which throughout the world continue to be the main producers of food for subsistence and for local markets, are coming under pressure from liberalization and free-trade agreements which favor industrial production methods. These are worldwide developments which threaten the food sovereignty of people in both the southern and northern hemispheres.

In conjunction with agricultural training institutes and farming organizations, we have set up two exhibitions about market gardening and mountain farming / meat production which are on display in parishes around Switzerland. We are pleading our support for small-scale, family-run and/or cooperative farming in contrast to the interests of international agribusiness. Against the background of our ecumenical contacts in Argentina and Paraguay in particular, we have helped to create a broad Swiss coalition against the biofuel industry. We support the concept of food sovereignty⁵ developed by the Via Campesina farmers' movement, which wants decisions about production and consumption of agricultural goods to be made directly by the stakeholders themselves, thus promoting small-scale, sustainable structures.

We encourage the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Grand Rapids to make food sovereignty and fairly produced food its common task and priority in the implementation of the Accra Confession, by becoming involved in the processes of "life-giving agriculture".

Financial Economy

Back in 2003 our policy drew attention to the damaging dominance of the financial markets over the real economy: "This speculation capital is responsible to a large extent for the insecurity and instability of the world markets." The huge financial crisis of the past two years has rocked our country too, since no other country has such a large banking sector compared to its size. Internationally, the crisis of the past two years has seen the destruction of huge assets and the nationalization of private losses. This has led to the poor becoming even poorer. Even in our rich canton, according to official social reports 7 % of all households are poor and 5 % are at a high risk of poverty. In the financial crisis, our state bailed out one single large bank to the tune of 64 billion Swiss francs. At the same time, our government rejected an increase in development aid of 0.5 %, a minute sum in comparison to such amounts. We, the churches, argued for 0.7 %. At the same time, our extensive system of social security is questioned more and more often. Here in Switzerland, too, the poor pay for the mistakes of the wealthy. We know that our financial policy is not sustainable, for example the banking secret, which facilitates tax evasion in many other countries and has allowed capital created in other economies to flow into our coffers.

Although instructed to do so by the synods, we do not have enough capacity in this field to run our own large projects. We refer to the text on the financial crisis produced by the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches.⁶ Our Ecumenical Mission Development centre supports the political development campaign "Steuerwende" ("Tax Change"), which campaigns for a more just tax system in our country. Tax evasion by private individuals alone results in a loss of more than 5.4 billion Swiss francs to countries in the southern hemisphere – two and a half times the amount that Switzerland gives in development aid. Our policy also

⁵ http://viacampesina.org/main_en/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=47&Itemid=27

⁶ www.openforumdavos.ch/media/pdf/OFD2010/SEK_Finanzkrise.pdf

drew attention to the issue of pension funds, which also closely involve us in the financial economy. The Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches has carried out a study on this subject; the Accra action plan makes great demands on us in respect of our own financial investments.

We encourage the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to take the bold step towards initiating an ecumenical forum on the financial system within the ecumenical movement and based on the declarations of the WCC central committee of September 2009⁷. This forum should formulate ethical principles for the creation of a new political architecture for the financial markets and propound these clearly throughout the world. These principles must aim to achieve the highest possible degree of economic and ecological justice, to strengthen the real economy, minimize the risks of 'casino capitalism' and its adoption by the state, as well as set clear limits to greed and short-term profit. The reformed churches should also advocate just tax laws as demanded by the Tax Justice Network, in which our charitable associations are involved.⁸

Care Economy

In our policy we drew attention to the central issue of inequality between the sexes: „The work involved in caring for others, the family and the home is not taken into consideration in economic calculations; it is not considered to be “market-worthy”, although it forms the basis of all societies and ensures our future.” According to new studies in Switzerland, the amount of care work exceeds paid work by 20 % and two-thirds is carried out by women. The financial crisis and the gradual erosion of the welfare state threaten to exacerbate this situation.

In 2009 both ourselves and the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches (FSPC) supported a conference on the care economy organized by WIDE (Women in Development Europe).⁹ In 2009 the women's conference of the FSPC was of the opinion that the care economy was an issue which should urgently be addressed by the churches.¹⁰

We encourage the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to acknowledge the weaknesses in the Accra Confession regarding inequality between the sexes and the care economy and to address its attention to this issue both within and outside the church. The issues of care, solidarity, love and human relationships beyond the market and competition pose major challenges to reformed theology.

Illegal Immigrants

One manifestation of the globalized world is illegal immigrants, that is, people who live in another country in precarious circumstances without the permission of the immigration authorities. In Switzerland there are currently between 90,000 and 300,000 men, women and children in this situation. In our region, the national churches and Jewish community have set up an expert advisory council for illegal immigrants. Our church's immigration centre has adopted this council's recommendations on making the everyday life of illegal immigrants more humane and has made a valuable contribution to the creation of an advisory centre for illegal immigrants.¹¹ The national churches are working with the relevant authorities to address the manifold problems of these people. Refugees who have had their claim for asylum rejected also face similar difficulties.

We encourage the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to view the issue of immigrants living in precarious circumstances in other countries without sufficient legal protection as a

⁷ <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/central-committee/geneva-2009/reports-and-documents/report-on-public-issues/statement-on-just-finance-and-the-economy-of-life.html>

⁸ http://www.taxjustice.net/cms/front_content.php?idcatart=2

⁹ <http://www.wide-network.ch/en/index.php>

¹⁰ <http://www.sek-feps.ch/organisationen/frauenkonferenz.html>

¹¹ <http://www.sans-papiers-contact.ch/>

http://www.refbejuso.ch/fileadmin/user_upload/Downloads/OeME_Migration/OM_Inhalte_Erklaerung_Sans_Papiers.pdf

central theme of its theology, ecclesiology (its relationship with the churches and communities of immigrants), of its outreach work and approach to globalization.

Immigrant Churches

Over the past years, our church has built up contacts to various immigrant churches in our region. There are currently over fifty immigrant churches representing different nationalities, cultures, languages and confessions in our parish. They form a new and vitalizing element in the church landscape and are an expression of the multicultural nature of the church – “the body of Christ” – in Bern today. Most of the members of these immigrant churches come from southern countries, asylum seekers living in difficult economic circumstances whose residence status is uncertain. Last year, our church’s synod decided to intensify relations to these new ecumenical partners. In a publication entitled “God’s People are of Many Colors”¹², parishes are invited to approach the local immigrant churches, offer hospitality and cooperate in parish activities and services.

We encourage the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to draw attention to the increasing importance of immigrant churches and invite their member churches to work with these new ecumenical partners. In particular we should encourage theological discussion between reformed and charismatic religions.

Palestine/Israel

For many decades our church has nurtured a close relationship with churches, ecclesiastical and non-ecclesiastical institutions in Israel and Palestine. The work of our churches finds a framework in the Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum of the World Council of Churches.¹³

In 2008 we joined with the Federation of Swiss Reformed Churches and the World Council of Churches in organizing an international theological conference entitled “Promised Land”, in which numerous theologians from the worldwide ecumenical community took part. The “Bern Perspective” was formulated as the conference’s closing statement.¹⁴

We encourage the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and all member churches to hear the cry of the people and churches in the Middle East and respond to it in their prayers, theology, by visiting and taking action. Their cry can be heard in the document “A Moment of Truth: A word of faith, hope and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering”¹⁵, which calls on us to take concrete action to create hope and affect change and reconciliation.

Biblical Theology and Interreligious Dialogue

In our “Globalization of Justice” policy we committed ourselves to deepening our spirituality in the context of globalization issues. In our church’s current legislature objectives 2008-11 we have set down that “our work will always be accompanied by theological reflection on the content and relevance of our faith and our protestant heritage.”

In response to the impulse given by the Accra Confession, our Ecumenical Mission Development centre organized a series of seminars on the topic “The Bible and the Economy”, which take place every two years with guests from different churches around the world. We received strong spiritual inspiration from the WCC plenum in Porto Alegre, in which we played an active role. Subsequently, in 2007, the Ecumenical Mission Development centre ran a bible-based seminar on “Believing in Changing the World”, with contributions by, among others, Robina Winbush of the United States Presbyterian Church.

Interreligious work has played a very central role in the life of our church over the last few years. In this area, our theology is directly challenged by global developments. Our synod was the first in Switzerland to decide to formulate officially the relationship of our church to Judaism, Islam and other world religions in its legal statutes. Our church has drawn up a theological assessment on this: “Encounters and Dialogue between Religions”. In our

¹² <http://www.refbejuso.ch/inhalte/migration-integration/migrationskirchen.html>

¹³ <http://www.eappi.org/>

¹⁴ <http://www.oikoumene.org/gr/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/public-witness-addressing-power-affirming-peace/middle-east-peace/13-09-08-bern-perspective.html>

¹⁵ <http://kairopalestine.ps/>

church's everyday business, numerous encounters between people of different religions take place and we learn that the dialogue between religions is the dialogue of life. Inspired by the 500th anniversary of the birth of John Calvin, the Swiss churches have relaunched the discussion on reformed beliefs.¹⁶ The foundation and development of the World Council of Reformed Churches will provide us with significant encouragement in this, and a place where our faith and actions are called to account.

¹⁶ <http://www.ref-credo.ch/>