

APPENDIX G

BERLIN KIRCHENTAG

28 MAY – 1 JUNE, 2003

A Kirchentag provides an open opportunity for German Christians - and visitors from abroad - to come together for worship, Bible study, lectures and seminars and to meet representatives of countless church organisations. It was my privilege to be the official guest from the Church of Ireland at this year's Kirchentag which was held in Berlin and I was very kindly given hospitality in a family belonging to a Berlin parish. Already before the formal opening of the five day event, I attended the launch of an exhibition on Anglicanism, to which I had been invited, at the British Embassy.

Until now, Protestant and Roman Catholic Kirchentags have been separate, but this year's was the first German Ecumenical Kirchentag. Some 150,000 people were present at the opening outdoor service at the Brandenburg Gate; so, the place which so many associate with the breaking down of the 'Wall' was now also a place where at least some church barriers were coming down. The service itself was a powerful witness to Christ in a very secular context.

At the end of the opening service, a message from Pope John Paul II was read, reflecting on the Kirchentag theme "You shall be a blessing" and calling on Christians to raise their voices "when it comes to matters of justice and peace, the preservation of marriage and the family, or ethical questions at the beginning and end of life". Then Germany's President, Johannes Rau, and Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder spoke words of encouragement to the assembled crowds. A similarly enormous outdoor service was held at the close of the Kirchentag in the grounds of the Reichstag.

Chancellor Schroeder not only attended the opening service but also participated in the Kirchentag programme later in the week by engaging in an evening of discussion with young people on the theme of the future of Europe. Another remarkable engagement with young people was the visit of the Dalai Lama, who had an audience of 20,000. He spoke on the theme, 'Living without Violence', and one report of the event saying the Buddhist spiritual leader had been received "like a pop star".

A reception for official guests was given by the President of the State of Brandenburg at the Chancellery in Potsdam, when a greeting from the Archbishop of Canterbury was read; Dr Williams paid tribute to the witness of the Kirchentag movement over recent decades and recognised the first ecumenical Kirchentag as "an impetus to further ecumenical progress".

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The controversial Protestant bishop, Margot Kaessmann of Hannover, led one of the morning Bible studies in a packed Deutschlandhalle - the largest hall in the grounds where the principal events of the Kirchentag were held (the Berliner Messe). Bishop Kaessmann recently withdrew from the central committee of the World Council of Churches, amid some controversy, because of differences with the Orthodox. In the course of her lively Bible study (on Ephesians 1:3-14), Bishop Kaessmann made a plea for theologians to employ simpler and more user-friendly language, and she herself put that principle into practice.

As well as Bible studies, there were lectures and seminars on four main themes: Witnessing to faith, Seeking unity, Respecting human dignity, and Shaping the world, and there was the formal German ratifying ceremony of the *Charta Oecumenica*, an agreed document setting forth guidelines for the growing co-operation among churches in Europe. More than 1,000 people were present for this ceremony and afterwards, the General Secretary of the Conference of European Churches (of which the Church of Ireland is a member-church), Dr Keith Clements, who took part in the event, commented for the press: "I little thought I would see the day when, with over 1,000 people gathered in a hall for an ecumenical meeting, people would still be turned away for lack of space! This occasion will undoubtedly prove to be one of the most important milestones in the story of the *Charta Oecumenica* since its launching two years ago in Strasbourg. It could also prove to be one of the most seminal events in the ecumenical movement, not only in Germany but in the wider Europe. Precisely through its simplicity and directness, the *Charta* has unleashed a new impulse of commitment to closer church fellowship and cooperation and a new determination to face some of the greatest challenges such as intercommunion. While the climax came with signing of the *Charta* by the heads of the German churches, this was not just a church leaders' occasion: the people of God as a whole are reclaiming the ecumenical movement for themselves".

Already before going to Berlin, I had been reading of the draft proposed constitution for the EU in the press. I was therefore interested in following this subject and in particular the question of the inclusion of a religious dimension in the text of the constitution. At the Kirchentag, the future of Europe was indeed a major topic and the discussions left me in no doubt of two things in particular: first, the churches wanted a reference to the spiritual and religious heritage of Europe included in the text of the constitution, but wanted this done in a sensitive way; and second, there was, at least at the Kirchentag, a relaxed attitude to European federalism. The vision of a federal European Union was not, however, one of what sometimes is described as 'fortress Europe'; rather, the desire for a politically unified EU appeared to me as being largely due to a desire for Europe to be effective in its responsibilities within the wider world. Dr Elmar Brok, chairman of the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs, said that while some countries

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in the EU see themselves as larger, and others as 'smaller', for the United States all the countries of the EU are 'small'. He said common European foreign and security policies were needed so that these matters were not simply determined "in Washington or New York". Dr Brok said that within the EU the larger countries had an "overvalued" role and stressed that the smaller member-states had to be assured of their full "sense of identity".

Also related to the theme, Shaping the world, was a panel discussion focusing on the churches and the global economy, at which Neville Gabriel, director of the Justice and Peace Commission of the South African Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference drew attention to the fact that at the end of the apartheid regime in South Africa the German banks were the largest creditors to the South African government.

Within Germany itself, Dr Wolfgang Gern, director of the Diakonisches Werk in Hessen and Nassau, said that more and more people in his area were turning to the Church for counselling; they were unemployed or homeless, in debt or drug addicts, and were deeply disturbed. He warned that the German government's Agenda 2010 economic reform programme would throw over 3 million people and their families into poverty.

On the more ecclesiastical front, there was controversy over intercommunion. Professor Gotthold Hasenhuettl, a Roman Catholic priest and theologian from Saarbruecken, celebrated an 'open' Eucharist on Ascension Day evening in a packed Protestant church, although the service was not part of the official Kirchentag programme. On the following day, Cardinal Walter Kasper, president of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, said that public pressure would not help bring about agreement on the Eucharist. Furthermore, according to a report in the 'Berliner Morgenpost', a spokesman for the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Berlin, Cardinal Sterzinsky, said that after the Kirchentag the Roman Catholic Church would consider possible sanctions against Professor Hasenhuettl. Another priest who took part in an ecumenical communion service at the Kirchentag, Fr Bernhard Kroll, has already been suspended from duties.

Young people were very much to the fore throughout the Kirchentag, and so was their music and singing. The daily Kirchentag newspaper recorded that of 192,000 participants almost 40% were under 30 years of age. Women were somewhat in the majority, being 59% of the participants, and 62.7% of participants were Protestants with 36% being Roman Catholics. The Kirchentag cost €18.2m, with €6.8m being contributed by the 'Land' of Berlin and €120,000 by Brandenburg.

The programme book for the Berlin Kirchentag ran to a total of 720 pages; it was therefore possible to be present only at selected events. Indeed, anyone going to a Kirchentag must realise that choosing events to attend is a vital part of the preparation -

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otherwise the vast number of possible things to do could simply be overwhelming. But, despite the crowds, there was a real sense of peace and peaceableness about the whole Kirchentag in Berlin, an atmosphere that was much helped by the fact that in various places in the event grounds there was worship and prayer throughout the day. One sensed overall a real engagement with affairs of church and society, theology and culture and the joy of the Holy Spirit.