

Protestants as everyday artists

A Bible Week of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE)

From Latvia to Italy, from Wales to Romania, from Lutheran, Reformed and United churches, from the church of the Bohemian Brethren and the Waldensians they came: members of European Protestant churches to Berlin for the annual CPCE Bible Week. However, the topic which brought them together was anything but “typically Protestant”. It was about art and Protestantism, about art in the church and in the everyday life of Protestants, and finally about the Protestant art of living.

What Protestant everyday art could be was sketched out by the former bishop of the Lutheran Church of Austria, Magister Herwig Sturm: a life against a background of freedom, which is open to the surprising encounter with the other. “This openness combines the Protestant art of living with art generally,” he remarked. However, he did not forget to mention that Protestants have little practice in that, which in principle is fair comment. In the studio of faith the Protestant becomes uncertain: where there is no work to be done but play is allowed, where there are no clear messages but ambiguous images, where what counts is no longer achievement and enjoyment is quite evident, self-consciousness disappears. In Protestant countries people are more educated but cook less well, Sturm remarked with a twinkle in his eye, which showed one thing above all: the art of Protestants in dealing with their own deficiencies.

Thus at short notice the world of the Berlin Bible weeks was turned into a studio. The everyday artist Tina Schwichtenberg showed how close to each other everyday life and art are – for example when she asks for small gifts from passers-by and makes a surprisingly beautiful mosaic out of them. Or when she takes rock powder in order laboriously to make the names of concentration camp victims visible on the ground; very soon they disappear with the first breath of wind. But the new perspective is also used on visits to churches and museums: to discover the everyday in great works of art means conversely to learn to see the everyday as a work of art, as a possibility of encounter with the wholly other, indeed the Holy.

Examples from Italy and Latvia made it clear that the essence of a church need not be communicated by the word but can be conveyed by images and music. The Waldensians used one image: a tree is rooted in breaks in the rocks; it is gnarled, with branches broken off, but still towers above its surroundings and right at the top unfolds its crown. Here is the motto of the Apocalypse: be faithful unto death... This image, which came into being in the Second World War, says much about this time and the spirit of the Waldensians. The Latvian Protestant Church was presented not only with numbers and dates but with music, a song of praise which made it clear what force the “singing revolution” had in Latvia. And the CPCE can perhaps be better symbolized by its hymnbook “Colours of Grace” and the rainbow scarf that goes with it than by many explanations and books.

One participant remarked that one cannot take learning home, but impulses – for example to see and shape worship itself as a liturgical work of art. And most people confirm that art should occupy a great deal of space in the Protestant churches.

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