## Open letter of CEC: "What future for Europe?" – Response by FSPC

*Introduction:*

Upon receiving the open letter, FSPC (Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches) deliberated upon it internally with representatives of our churches who are familiar with CEC and the issues affecting Europe. The present response is a result of these deliberations, and only implicates the secretariat of FSPC. The FSPC Council has not yet been consulted, as it does not usually respond to "open letters".

FSPC would like to thank CEC (Conference of European Churches) for having the courage to tackle these difficult questions, and supports the proposition that the discussion be continued in anticipation of and during the General Assembly. The methodology for carrying out this discussion, however, has yet to be devised. In any event, the duty of each church is to first reflect on its role in the political evolution of its country, and encourage its members to take their civic responsibilities seriously. The European Union and other European institutions have a direct and significant influence on all our daily lives, and churches are well advised to earnestly consider these issues amongst themselves, using the variety of instruments of ecumenical cooperation and witness at their disposal, such as that of CEC. It is likely other church organisations in Europe are asking the same questions, in which case it would be a good idea to hold a global exchange. Even so, churches must first have their voices heard in the arena of the national debate on the future of Europe.

Our brief response consists of three parts. First of all, we would like to explore some of the elements included in the document, for to us they seem to be relevant with respect to the approach to be taken by churches. Secondly, we will share some of our ideas on the way in which the situation of Europe today is perceived in Switzerland and at FSPC, in particular on the basis of our past experiences. Finally, we will convey an additional suggestion for the continuation of the discussion.

1.  We find the document to be heavily (perhaps overly) concentrated on the history of the European Union and the ecumenical movement, and not enough on their present and future. The result is an overall assessment which of course includes the Lisbon Treaty (without, however, conjuring the troubled and obstacle-ridden history of its adoption), but which doesn't really discuss the challenges that have arisen from the expansion of post-communist Europe. Likewise, the role of the Cold War and of anti-communism in the consolidation of the EU remains unmentioned. We believe these subjects are important for understanding the current situation.

    Otherwise, the document introduces the various crises presently affecting Europe in an extremely precise manner. This list seems to cover the major points. However, the lack of an order of priority weakens its analysis. From a Swiss point of view, we might suggest the following order: 1. Economic developments and Euro crisis; 2. Democratic deficit; 3. Euroscepticism; 4. Violent conflicts and terrorist attacks; 5. Migration.

    Next, the document focuses its argumentation around the question of Europe's core values. Our discussions in Switzerland have made us wonder just how effective such

an approach really is. First of all, it is not a question of "values" or "no values", but the priority assigned to values, and especially the way each value is defined. Secondly, the Europe of today is neither the same as it was during the years of its creation nor during the years of its consolidation in the 1990s, but exists in an entirely different context. It is therefore understandable that its prevailing values have evolved. Finally, values without rights or duties generally have little value at all. A large part of today's barriers and lassitudes are caused by the EU's institutional architecture and treaties, and the variety of different interpretations by EU Member States of the latter. Competition between the Commission and the national positions of certain governments makes EU policy unclear and seemingly ineffective for citizens. The problem of national sovereignty cannot be automatically equated with unhealthy nationalism. We therefore fear that an argument based primarily on values is a trap and a misguided idea that only leads to empty rhetoric and pious hopes.

Similarly, from a Reformed point of view, we do not believe there is a need for churches to provide Europe with a soul, or restore one that has been said lost. The document has an exhortative, indeed slightly moralising tone, which can make it difficult to enter into discussion with politicians.

2. A few things to consider from the standpoint of Switzerland's political history.

Switzerland may not be a member of the EU, but it is at the very heart of Europe. It is linked to the EU via bilateral investment and institutional treaties, including the Schengen and Dublin Agreements. It goes without saying that all development in the EU has a direct impact on Swiss policy and that Switzerland has an overriding interest to maintain political and economic exchanges with the EU by way of the tools at its disposal. Switzerland's own political history, in particular, has enabled it to gain valuable insight into the evolution of the EU. Here we only need evoke a few features of the "Swiss system" to provide an idea of some of the avenues which could also be explored on the European level. This we will do in a very succinct manner:

- despite Switzerland's small size and population, it took almost 100 years (beginning with the Treaty of Vienna in 1815, which set the country's current borders) for the Swiss system to achieve the proper balance.

- the cohabitation of 3–4 different cultures made it necessary to create protective systems for minorities and small entities.

- the cohabitation and co-management by these various entities is only possible through a strong collective will to remain independent and as one. Diverse denominations are included in this framework, and contributed to the strengthening (and not the division) of the country's unity, for when up against powerful neighbours it was vital for survival that people stand together rather than as enemies.

- the culture of compromise and of a pragmatic approach is based on this willingness to find a solution that, given the situation, guarantees everyone the maximum amount of benefits, and perpetuates collective living in the long term, even if the latter comes at the price of being temporarily cut off from the outside world.

- given the circumstances, the principle of subsidiarity is an ideal model for solving problems and answering questions at the most basic level, or at the level of the entities which are directly concerned. It is achieved in a somewhat formal way, using a procedure that delegates skills from the bottom up in case the parties are unable to reach an agreement.

A further comment on the global context in which we have been evolving during the past decade. Currently, Switzerland is also witnessing the emergence of an uninhibited right wing, an openly xenophobic far right, populism and governments conveying a strong sense of nationalism. The classic democratic model is increasingly being called into question or revealing its limits (e.g. in Switzerland during important elections with uncommonly weak majorities and routine recourse to referendums). The emergence of social media has completely redefined political culture, resulting in a kind of permanent electoral campaign in search of success and publicity via statistics such as "likes" and "followers". This constant "changing of minds" creates a certain degree of democratic fatigue, indeed a feeling of "saturation", which benefits politicians who are in favour of powerful, even authoritarian regimes. This is especially evident with Europe's neighbours and competitors. Furthermore, this has a substantial impact on the EU and can neither be neglected, ignored or summarily denounced. It is, simply, our reality. If CEC were to prepare a position paper on the future of Europe, it is our hope that the paper would be focused on such a perspective, and not just on an idealised past. The universalism of democratic and civic values which brought about the creation of modern nations in Europe (liberty, equality, fraternity) has been called into question and must be considered in a new light when confronted with the rise of cultures that are so different from our own (e.g. Chinese, Arab, Russian and North African). Some experts use the word "post-political" to describe this new paradigm, others have more recently cited the "post-truth" or "post-factual". We are a long way from the postmodernism and post-communism which marked the 1980s and 90s.

3. One final word. The concern of churches surrounding the future of the EU and Europe is indeed very important and welcome. Yet the question churches must eventually ask themselves, in a self-critical fashion, involves their common foundation. Like so many other ecumenical documents, this letter makes constant mention of the Charta Oecumenica, a sort of "Lisbon Treaty for European Churches" to which one should always refer. But are we really so sure of and convinced by this foundation in the Member Churches?  Could it be that European Churches have the same problems with their common foundation as the nations of Europe have with the Lisbon Treaty? Besides repeating the same sentences of the Charta over and over again, have churches carried out a serious evaluation of the concrete application and reception of this document in the everyday lives of CEC and CCEE members? Would CEC and CCEE Churches agree to sign the same Charta today, 17 years after its creation? If not, then why? Shouldn't this point also be brought up at the next CEC Assembly in 2018?

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