

Message from Slovenia: To give and take

by Bishop Geza Ernisa

Sisters and brothers,

Are there reasons for turning off the highways of big churches and taking the by-ways to discover the special features of smaller churches?

Yes, I think there are.

So let me mention a few points that will help us to better understand the responsibilities of a minority church.

1. Identifying with our roots

In our congregations, i.e. in our church there is a high level of identification with our roots in the Reformation, which led the founding of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Slovenia. These roots have sustained us over the years and kept the church alive. And in recent times they have helped us yet again to keep in touch with the foundations of our faith in completely new historical times.

2. Identifying with the region

The members of our congregations all live very close together in a relatively small territory. That means that the dentist and the lawyer, the butcher or the restaurant-owner participate alongside and with one another in our church governing bodies.

3. Taking responsibility

A special feature of our church is its variety of diaconal activities. Under the heading EHO (Evangelical Humanitarian Organization) we respond to the everyday needs of church members in situations of poverty and all others suffering hardship of any kind.

4. Integrating into socio-political structures

During the years in which our country has been engaged in rebuilding itself, we have been able to make many contributions to structuring different areas of social policy. In this regard, it has been very important to work closely with ecumenical and also political partners at the regional and national level.

5. Participating in daily life

Although our numbers mean that we only constitute a tiny minority of 1% in our country, we share in all important duties required by the state. For example, we provide two military chaplains to support the members of the army. And it goes without saying that our chaplains accompany our soldiers on their foreign missions, e.g. in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Kosovo and elsewhere.

6. Participating in economic development

Our church has been very involved as an intermediary for small and medium-sized companies entering the world of the European Single Market. In particular, we have held seminars and lectures to help people running small businesses to come to grips with this new environment. Recently I heard a remark by a businessman that is typical: “Yes, you Protestants with your network!” We are perceived as ‘takers’ but sometimes also as ‘givers’, and I am very grateful for that.

7. Participating in the network of Balkan churches

We seek to make our contribution to proclaiming the gospel in this part of Southeast Europe in good neighborly relations with, above all, the small Evangelical Lutheran Churches in Croatia and Serbia.

We continue to attach great importance to our roots in the Reformation of Martin Luther. It was Protestant pastors, for example, who gave the people of Slovenia their first books and thus founded our written language. That was a huge project at the time, and it was only possible to carry it out thanks to the support from friends in Germany and elsewhere.

Today, too, we constantly face tremendous new challenges in the modern age. Let me mention only a few of such projects:

- the new edition of Scripture in modern Slovenian
- the expanding of mobile diakonia in our regions and particularly in the villages
- the building of a new parish center to accommodate groups from this village community
- the renovation of a former parsonage for use as a center for youth activities
- issuing a new hymn book with modern as well as traditional hymns
-

All this calls for a lot of commitment from church members and is only possible thanks to our integration in the overall network of European churches, in particular the Lutheran World Federation. It is not always easy to present our projects in such a way that they can gain attention alongside all the many applications from the larger churches. And yet in all our small churches in Southeast Europe we need this support and assistance so that Protestant Christians in our villages and towns can find the living space that encourages life.

Here we are very willing to give up something of what we regard as our treasure: e.g. common life in a close geographic area. That means that quite different people now form the church in often quite different regions. We have a lot of experience of living as a church in clearly minority situations – and are very willing to share this.

Building bridges between different ethnic groups, between different social classes is another area in which we have experience that we would be glad to share with others.

Living at the crossroads between East and West, between South and North has given us an important role to play. It is all the more important to us not to be left alone in this role and, time and again, to be able to count on support when facing our often difficult challenges.

Yes, there are reasons to turn off the highways of the big churches to stop over in our small churches, and to find out what we are like. We look forward to meeting you! We are very willing to share what we have with others. Life is always about giving and taking; teaching and learning; loving and not hating.

8. And quite modestly to conclude

What do we expect from the different connections?

- We hope that through many visits, encounters and conversations we will be preserved from being forgotten since we are off the highway of the big churches.
- We hope that our congregational leadership and the church members themselves will be strengthened as we go forward and many different friends will accompany us on this path.
- We ask you to say a critical word if you think this is appropriate,
- and we are grateful for financial or material support whenever we cannot manage a special, important project on our own.

I invite you to come by and visit us in our region and to enjoy our hospitality. Our thermal springs will do you good! And our common calling in the gospel will be a source of strength to both sides.