



The 2005 Kirchentag

Richard Mortimer

Revd Richard Mortimer is the United Reformed Church's Secretary for Ecumenical Relations and Faith and Order and a member of the Management Committee of CEWERN

For five gloriously sunny days in May - some might say 'too hot' - the Kirchentag descended upon Hannover, the city where it had first begun and had met twice before. 'The Kirchentag has come home' proclaimed Bishop Margot Käßmann, herself a former Kirchentag General Secretary and now head of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hannover, in her greeting to the international guests, a theme endorsed throughout by the main railway station which greeted bilingually the arrival of every train 'to the city of the 2005 Kirchentag'. Stir in the statistics: 105,000 participants, of whom some 5,000 international guests came from 87 countries (this last figure higher than ever before), sharing in 3,600 events at 500 venues aided and abetted by 50,000 voluntary workers. Sheila Brain, the English representative on the Central Planning Committee, reckons it has become the largest regular gathering of Christians from around the world outside of a World Council of Churches General Assembly, and of its essential nature much more accessible to the enthusiast. Professor Eckhard Nagel, the Kirchentag President, described it as a forum for a conversation on society and its future between interest groups, facilitated by Christians who are themselves active players. Added to which it is above all a lay-led, church-supported movement.

All of which makes it a highly significant event which is incredibly difficult to describe, such is the variety of what goes on. Any attempt to reflect on its broad shape may well be unrecognisable to participants who attended different events. Certainly the Kirchentag's own daily newspaper went for variety of coverage rather than focussing on particular themes. And where, arguably, the ecumenical nature of the 2003 event in Berlin had given some focus, this one felt more polyphonic, more of a kaleidoscope. Nevertheless, here goes.

Before I attended, as I pondered the theme 'When your child asks, in time to come...' (Deuteronomy 6. verses 20 to 25). I imagined

there would be much on the place of children in the church and in the world, on adult responsibilities towards them and safeguarding, and also much on the healing of memories, especially given the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. My experience proved me wrong on all counts. Yes, there was an affirmation of the place of children in God's Kingdom beside men and women. Yes, there did seem to have been a significant children's programme and kindergarten facility running concurrently with the adult programme. I have friends in the field of children's work who would have been delighted it was there but saddened at the separateness and lack of inclusion. Yes, the 60th anniversary of the end of the war was mentioned and, although nothing was made of it, the programme did advertise a pilgrimage to Bergen-Belsen on the Friday. Yes, Hannover is twinned with Hiroshima. Yes, some bible studies did focus on the healing of memories, especially on the Saturday. But the overwhelming focus throughout was not on the *past* but on the *future*. What sort of a world and what sort of values did we want to pass on to our children? What were the roots of our faith and how did this get handed on to the next generation? This worked itself out in three main thematic topic areas: How can we believe?, How do we want to live? and How are we to act?

The major notes seemed to be (a) global justice, (b) community, especially between nations and in relations with those of other faith and (c) the environment and the balance between economy and ecology. Margot Käßmann, preaching at the Opening Service on the theme text, developed a broad canvas covering all these points from a primary focus on the Deuteronomist's concern for justice in the land and the protection of the alien in the midst with particular reference to refugees and asylum seekers. Daily coverage in the Hannover newspapers, which was extensive, tended to pick up the political dimension - anti-capitalism, unemployment, Islam and issues around Turkey's application to join the EU. Those involved in the Make Poverty History Campaign might be interested in Eckhard Nagel's dictum that poverty was not a tragedy but a scandal.

Ecumenically I found a double focus. In the light of the above there was that broader understanding of oikoumene as the whole inhabited earth, with particular reference to issues of church and society. But there was also quite a lot about Protestant - Catholic relations in Germany and the quest for Eucharistic hospitality, which reached a high point in a wonderful debate between Eberhard Jüngel (Barth's student and Moltmann's colleague) and Karl Cardinal Lehmann and crystallised in a memorable exchange where Jüngel quoted Canon Law to the effect that the Eucharist was not just a sign of unity but an instrument to help create it and that therefore what was needed was a theology of journey sustenance on the route towards it. To which Lehmann replied

that for Catholics the Eucharist was so significant that to share it and then leave going our separate ways was inconceivable.

The presence and active involvement of heavyweight political figures was striking. Chancellor Schröder participated in a major session on World Partnership and Globalisation, dialoguing with a Nobel Peace Prize winner and representatives of the South with challenging things to say. Christian Wulff, the Roman Catholic Prime Minister of Lower Saxony and a huge supporter of the Hannover event, appeared on eight separate occasions, including a bible study and four different podium discussions. Antje Vollmer, Vice President of the Bundestag, took part in a session on women's issues and two dialogue bible studies, in one of which she painted a vivid picture of how at best to honour the child, become as a child and allow the internal child to live again: a child should have a protective, permeable layer around its soul, letting stuff in and out, processing, learning to live in freedom, trust and creativity. Some English participants at the Kirchentag longed to see British politicians so up front about their faith, as others longed for more bishops like Margot Käßmann.

More than once I heard the statement that it was better to live before God asking the right questions than to live inauthentically before God with inadequate answers. Syncopating round that were memorable insights. Sam Kobia, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, talking about the characteristics of a moral community. Manfred Kock, former head of the Church in the Rhineland, taking issue with Peter Berger's phrase that Western Europe was a 'church catastrophe area'. Friedrich Schorlemmer, minister in Wittenberg, averring that we were not prepared for one world and far too many wanted to change the world without changing themselves. The great Richard Rohr reflecting on the two major stages of the spiritual journey and the challenge of moving from the first to the second.

In the market of possibilities a stall seeking vocations to ministry asked passers by to indicate which of nine characteristics was most important for a minister. Overwhelmingly the largest number of votes went to 'Teamfähigkeit' - proficiency in Team Ministry, being a Team Player. This theme was echoed on several occasions as issues around ministerial deployment emerged. I can only say that the Kirchentag was a marvellous opportunity to feel part of a wider whole and that in a very positive way I found myself at the closing communion reflecting on Paul's injunction to discern the body. I came away feeling that in a very special way I had.

