

10-1995

The Kecskemet Ecumenical Conference Letter To Christians and Churches of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe

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Recommended Citation

(1995) "The Kecskemet Ecumenical Conference Letter To Christians and Churches of Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 15: Iss. 5, Article 11.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol15/iss5/11>

The Conference included daily prayer and Bible study, lectures on various aspects of the role of religion in contributing to and resolving ethnic and nationalist conflicts, and discussion sessions on nationalism and ethnicity, the peaceful resolution of conflicts, pastoral approaches to national animosities, and the confession of sins and recognition of responsibilities.

Speakers included Dr. Béla Harmati, President of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in Hungary, Archbishop Dr. István Seregely, President of the Hungarian Catholic Bishops Conference, Dr. Marko Oršolić of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Dr. Miroslav Volf of Croatia. Among those who greeted the conference were Mr. Arpád Goncz, President of the Republic of Hungary, and Mr. Zoltán Gál, President of the Hungarian Parliament.

The conference was organized by the Ecumenical Study Center of Budapest with the support of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in Hungary and the Hungarian Catholic Bishops' Conference. The Europe Committee of the National Council of Churches and Christians Associated for Relationships with Eastern Europe, both from the United States also assisted with the conference. Delegates came from a dozen Central, Eastern, and Southeastern European countries, and from Western Europe, the United States and Japan. Observers included the World Council of Churches, the Conference of European Churches, the Council of European Catholic Bishops' Conferences, the Lutheran World Federation, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and members of Pax Christi.

This conference would not have been possible without the generous hospitality of the Reformed Church and other churches in Kecskemét.

For More Information:

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The Kecskemét Ecumenical Conference Letter
To Christians and Churches of Central, Eastern,
and Southeastern Europe:

Dear Sisters and Brothers!

From August 21 to 27, 1995 upon the invitation of the Ecumenical Council of Churches of Hungary and the Hungarian Catholic Bishops' Conference, over 180 sisters and brothers in Christ met in Kecskemét, Hungary, at a conference on "The Christian Faith and Human Enmity." Among us were church leaders, clergy (ministers, priests, pastors), nuns and monks, peace activists, laity, and others representing a cross section of

Orthodox, Catholic and various Protestant churches from over 20 countries. We met in worship, Bible study and prayer, lectures, discussion groups, workshops, sharing significant experiences of our communities, and friendly personal conversations. From this valuable experience of ecumenical fellowship we write to you about the insights we have gained in the common spiritual quest for the wholeness of the Church of Christ and of the world.

a) We are very aware of and saddened by the brokenness and suffering of our world especially in the Southeastern and Eastern parts of Europe. The suspicions and hostilities between different nationalities, the economic plight of many of our people, the political and ideological strife, the religious rivalries, and many other social ills are like a plague upon us. As members of religious communities we often receive distorted images of our neighbors; we pledge ourselves to revise these distorted images and ask our communities to join us in changing enemy images of others. The tragic warfare in the Balkans is a vivid warning to us about the destructiveness of uncontrolled conflicts and the tragedy that is inevitable when ethnic, religious, social, and political rivalries are allowed to explode. We are deeply moved by the suffering of the millions of refugees and other victims of this horrible war.

b) In our study of the Biblical story of Jesus and the disciples in the boat during a storm (Matthew 8:23) we gained the insight that Jesus continues to be with us in the current storms of life. We receive the assurance that Jesus can transform our enmities and fears into faith and hope. Our certainty is that history is ultimately in God's hands and "the gospel of peace" (Ephesians 6:15) can and will be proclaimed everywhere. God will, indeed, bring reconciliation and justice.

c) Again and again we are in need of interpersonal and intergroup reconciliation which comes to us through divine judgment, forgiveness, and *metanoia* (transformation). Although our churches have been weakened by the difficulties of the past decades, nevertheless we wish to apply our modest abilities and efforts to diminish the suffering caused by the present upheavals in our region. We do not wish to indulge in allocating blame but have joined in intense awareness of our common shortcomings and sins of omission and commission. With a contrite heart we admit our individual and collective failure to live up to the image intended for us by God (Gen. 1:27)

Thus, we are not addressing you with any demands or instructions nor do we have any special wisdom to impart. Rather we wish to share with you our commitment to be agents of reconciliation in a world characterized by suspicion and hatred, aggression and fear, separation and estrangement. Instead of living as sisters and brothers we have become aliens and even enemies who inflict unspeakable suffering upon each other, such as massacres, forcible migrations, hostile propaganda, and denial of basic human rights.

d) We repent for whatever we may have done or failed to do that has contributed to the pain of our fellow human beings. We wish therefore to affirm the following convictions:

1) that the earth of which we live is God's gift to all human beings (Psalms 24:1) and we have no right to claim it exclusively for our religious, national, or racial community;

2) that the diversity of languages, cultures, ethnicity, and belief can enrich our communities;

3) that God does not approve or bless any type of distortion or degradation of human dignity;

4) that the abuse and manipulation of religious faith for the purpose of waging war and the use of other forms of violence to dominate and torture others is reprehensible;

5) that different ethnic and religious groups can live together in peace and that the ideology and practice of "ethnic cleansing" is rejected.

e) We pledge ourselves to be reconcilers, bridge-builders, and promoters of love and well-being for all, regardless of political and religious belief, national and social origin, property and social status, or gender. We share this common endeavor, not only with other Christians, but also Jews, Muslims and other people, and hope that our common efforts will succeed, lest we all head into the abyss of physical and spiritual extermination.

We commit ourselves to the commandment of our Lord to love our neighbors, even our enemies (Mt. 5:43-48, etc.) as we do ourselves and to do with others as we would have them do unto us. We support all those who are carrying out God's work to the best of their abilities. Finally, we entrust ourselves to the infinite love of God who along knows what is best for humanity. (Psalms 101:1)

We pledge ourselves to continue by concrete plans and projects the work of Christ's reconciliation and mutual understanding across lines of conflict, which we have begun at this conference. We hope for your support and that of our churches in this endeavor.

We implore our sisters and brothers to give assistance to all refugees and other victims of war, to pray that the leaders of our countries should govern with wisdom and righteousness, and to pray for the well-being of all, including our enemies.

Yours in Christ Jesus, the Prince of Peace,

Participants of the Kecskemét Ecumenical Conference