

The Colourful Diversity of the Christian Faith
IRCA-Europe Conference, Sibiu 25-27 May 2016

The 500th anniversary of the Reformation provides an opportunity to look back on the story of the Christian faith and its impact on life today. The Bible speaks of the benefits of faith in Jesus Christ and the freedoms and responsibilities into which we are called to grow. This message of hope is as relevant today as it was in the past, and applies equally to all people, wherever they are and wherever they live.

Speakers at the IRCA-Europe conference held in Sibiu in May 2016 reflected on the challenges facing Europe in the sixteenth century and the ways that faith was then expressed. The impact of the religious movements was felt by those who dwelt in rural areas; the struggle for freedom led to displacement of populations which caused internal and external tensions. These issues remain relevant today. The message of the Bible also remains relevant, reminding us to use our freedom to serve one another and to find ways to live together in peace, justice and with respect for one another. This will be worked out in practice in different ways according to local contexts, but together we hold to the hope that we find in Jesus Christ.

In the parts of Europe represented at the conference, rural life is under threat today from challenges similar to those of the sixteenth century, as well as from demographic changes and lack of understanding of rural rhythms and values by policy makers. Rural areas do not enjoy the benefits of infrastructure, access to services and cultural and social benefits that are taken for granted in urban life. The conference held in Sibiu calls on politicians to take account of the needs of rural communities in their policies, and on the churches to share their message of hope and transformation. For its part, IRCA reaffirms its commitment to be a voice for the voiceless and to encourage and equip the rural church for its mission.

Conference statement / press release

The second conference of IRCA-Europe met in the Evangelische Akademie in Sibiu / Hermannstadt, in the Transylvanian region of Romania. Delegates from Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Switzerland and the United Kingdom were warmly welcomed, by Dietrich Galter and Roger Parvu from the Akademie and by Hermann Witter, Chair of IRCA-Europe. Bishop Reinhart Guib generously gave his time to join the conference on the first evening, bringing greetings and good wishes. The conference was enriched by keynote speakers, formal opportunities to hear about the life and work of the rural church in the countries represented, informal conversations over meals and worship that reflected the different languages and cultures of our countries – reinforced by an evening of traditional folk songs from around the world. Although Hermann reminded us that we were living in the time after Pentecost and the new understanding brought by the Holy Spirit, we were still grateful for the work of the translators for the main sessions, and for friends who spoke more than one language!

The conference theme was a challenge to respond as followers of Jesus Christ to the crises facing the world and their impact on local communities, just as much today as in the sixteenth century. Insecurity and fear for the future can lead too easily to putting up barriers and failing to see other people as brothers and sisters. The churches are called to fulfil their role as salt and light.

Keynote addresses were given by:

- Professor Dr Traugott Schaechtele. ‘The freedom of a Christian: the ongoing impact of a truly revolutionary writer, Martin Luther.’
- Bischof Kato Bela. ‘The relationship between Islam and Christianity in the Carpathian Region from the sixteenth century.’

- Rev Lothar Schullerus. ‘Call for freedom: developing rural regions within Europe together.’
- Jerry Marshall, President of IRCA and CEO of ARC. ‘Future perspectives for IRCA.’
- Rev. Lothar Schullerus. ‘Hope for East Asia’

Round up of news from countries.

In addition to the keynote addresses, there was an opportunity to share news of the life and work of the rural churches in the countries represented in Sibiu. This gave insights into the different contexts in which we are working, many of which were followed up informally during the conference. It was noted that many of the reports from the countries represented at the conference had covered similar issues. In particular these included:

- Demographic changes leading to withdrawal of younger people from rural areas.
- Changes in land use and agricultural practices
- Decreasing church membership
- Looser connections between people and loss of a sense of community spirit
- The churches are rising to the challenge to offer hope and transformation

‘Nothing can be so bad that we cannot fall into the hands of God.’

Presentations to Bishop Kato Bela

During the conference, a presentation was made to Bishop Kato Bela. Lothar Schullerus presented the Bishop with a chalice made in India, in recognition of his personal engagement in implementing the Swiss aid for rural areas in Transylvania. Over the last 25 years, he has created a support network that has helped 3,000 projects, created more than 30,000 job opportunities and distributed over 50 million Euros to new community projects. In accepting the chalice, Bishop Bela spoke of the hope for the future of rural areas through working together in cooperation and solidarity; and that the Church has capital that goes beyond silver and gold as it supports the voiceless and vulnerable.

Quadrennial General Meeting of IRCA- Europe, held on Thursday 26 May 2016

Hermann Witter chaired the meeting, welcomed members and gave a brief report. Elections were held for the Board members who would serve IRCA-Europe for the next four years. The following were nominated and declared duly elected:

Germany	Rolf Brauch
Hungary	Mihaly Sohajda
Poland	Roma Pawas
Romania	Dietrich Galter
Switzerland	Lothar Schullerus
UK	Ann Wright

Hermann was thanked for his work as Chair over the previous four years, and would remain on the Board for the next four years.

The elected members then held a brief meeting to approve the draft conference statement and elected:

Lothar Schullerus as Chair and representative on IRCA

Dietrich Galter as treasurer

The office and secretariat remains at LJA, Altenkirchen, Germany

These elections were announced on Friday 27 May to the membership, and the conference statement / press release was presented and agreed with one abstention.

The next IRCA worldwide conference will be held in Lincoln, New Zealand in April 2018: the next IRCA-Europe conference in 2020.

Keynote Addresses

Professor Dr Traugott Schaechtele – ‘The freedom of a Christian: the ongoing impact of a truly revolutionary writer, Martin Luther.’

The Reformation was not just a Protestant event but had wider impacts and implications. The 500th anniversary will be celebrated in Baden-Wurtemberg with a Festival Service on 31 October 2017, attended by Bishops from Roman Catholic and Protestant churches, bringing the two confessions together. This date will also be a national holiday for the first time, acknowledging its significance in the history of Europe.

In the sixteenth century, there were many pressures for change and reform. Education was increasing and printing enabled new ideas to be shared and circulated easily. Anti-clerical feelings grew with the financial impositions of the Church (including sale of indulgences), along with greater desire for freedom from feudal masters and the Church. These influences were felt in rural as well as urban areas. The Reformation changed the world in a fundamental way; it is important to understand its principles and the links between the thoughts and writings of the Reformers and the political situation. The main theological basis for the Reformation can be found in Martin Luther’s key principle of the freedom of the Christian.

There are two kinds of freedom:

- Freedom from something – eg addiction, illness, bondage, confinement, poverty, inequality.
- Freedom to do something – eg travel, make choices, share information and ideas.

Freedom is seen as a ‘good’ but total freedom can lead to chaos where there are no structures to develop a healthy civil society. My liberty to do (or not to do) whatever I want must be limited by the freedom and needs of others if we are to live together well. Distinctions can also be made between inner and outer freedom, as exemplified in Bonhoeffer’s poem ‘Who am I?’ Even when freedom is physically constrained, inner freedom of thought and attitude can be maintained. These freedoms influence, but are not always dependent, on each other.

Three key writings of Martin Luther in 1520 outline his thinking on the freedom of a Christian.

- ‘To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation’ (August 1520). The ‘walls of Rome’ should fall and the rulers take responsibility for the right ordering of the Church in their territory.
- ‘Of the Babylonian imprisonment of the Church’ (October 1520), arguing against with-holding the chalice from the laity, transubstantiation and belief that the Mass was a sacrifice and a good work.
- ‘On the freedom of a Christian’ (November 1520). This followed from his previous thought and writing over many years, and reflects the ideas from the 95 Theses.

Luther believed that the Christian has absolute freedom and responsibility to and for himself, but that this is set within the framework of being forgiven by, and obedient to, God. ‘I am not the measure of all things myself.’ Freedom is to be expressed in action and attitude. ‘The Christian is the free master of all things and subject to none: the Christian is servant of all, and subject to all.’

These ideas were taken up by the peasants in their struggles for liberty from oppressive masters. At first Luther supported this stance, but later wrote against the murder and violence of their rebellion, parting company with Muentzer about what is acceptable in building the Kingdom of God on earth.

Questions raised by Luther remain relevant today: about understanding of freedom, the nature of God and humankind, and the relationship between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world. Luther believed that it is not enough to search for God in private if the world outside is unjust. Heavenly and earthly justice cannot be separated but interact with each other, and Christians still need to use their freedom to set others free from injustice in all its forms.

Discussion following the address reflected on the relative significance of an individual’s actions and forms of communication as means to bring about change, particularly in an age of digital freedom when more information is widely available but with little accountability. Luther presented his ideas so that people knew what they were following; restrictions on freedom are dangerous, but better discussion on the limits of individual freedom is needed.

Bischof Kato Bela. 'The relationship between Islam and Christianity in the Carpathian Region from the sixteenth century.'

The Muslim invasions of the Middle Ages affected most of Europe. Christian people lost their influence, defeat in 1492 left the King of Hungary imprisoned, and Europe lost its protective shield against the Ottoman Empire. The peoples of the Arabian Peninsula were in conflict with one another at the same time, with their poor economic situation leading to incursions against neighbours. Islam was experiencing an imperialist phase and conquered many surrounding nations as part of Jihad or Holy War. The Ottoman Sultans from the time of Suleiman united smaller states and provided a powerful, effective, well-managed and sustainable government that appeared to replace the old 'Pax Byzantium.' However, the statistical data does not take account of the underlying human suffering. 'Pax Ottomani' apparently solved the problems of the decadent closing days of Byzantine power but was actually a tragedy for Central and Eastern Europe and its inhabitants. Ottoman policy looked like reconciliation but meant that many people were moved from their homelands. The Orthodox Church turned in on itself and sought refuge in theoretical and metaphysical ideas; the Imperial Library was burned after the fall of Constantinople in 1453; and the Hungarian and Balkan nations found themselves in an area where strict believers in Islam were extending their borders. Nobles and dynasties were divided between opposing the Islamic invaders or compromising and converting to Islam to retain power and influence. Peasants were often paying taxes to their own nobles and to the Turkish overlords unless they were willing to convert from Christianity. Many were estranged by the arbitrary nature of Ottoman rule and exploitation by their Islamic masters, although tolerated as necessary workers.

The ideas of the Reformation gave more power to individuals, but the division of Christianity into Catholic and Protestant meant that there was no united front against the Sultan. Different areas came to different settlements. Hungary was divided, with many priests facing imprisonment and death because of their prophetic calls to the nation and its leaders to repent and stand by their faith. The spiritual ideas of the Reformation were spread through preaching, development of printing and the vernacular Bible. The translation of the Hungarian Bible is significant in providing a focus for faith and also in contributing to national unity and the development of the national language. The Hapsburg King and the Sultan both tried to suppress the freedom of the presses in their kingdoms, but they remained free in Transylvania, where a vernacular Bible was also produced.

Transylvania was semi-independent, with the rulers issuing a tolerance edict for the different forms of Christianity in the face of the Ottoman threat. Many people felt that they fared better under Ottoman rule than under the Hapsburgs: an extra tax to remain Christian was better than the anti-Protestant rule of the Catholic monarch. However, the burden of Turkish occupation was difficult and the memory of these historical facts is still vivid. Although there was no obvious Islamophobia, the two communities had the difficult task of finding a way to live together in the same country. In general, it proved easier to live next to each other in peace as two separate households rather than to try to share one household; to preserve one's own culture and identity and allow the other to do the same to avoid conflict.

Who is the long term winner in this kind of situation? Demographically, it is the group which has most children, and this is the situation in much of Western Europe today. Younger people are needed to maintain the standard of living; migration is required to fill gaps, but how can this be achieved without causing conflict, or draining other countries of the best and brightest young people who are needed for growth in their own lands? Questions and insights from the past remain relevant today.

Discussion and questions centred on:

- *The influences of Islamic culture and learning on European thought eg mathematics, the alphabet, science, re-discovery of Aristotle and other classical writers and philosophers that were key to the Reformation; the Moorish culture of the Iberian Peninsula in the 15th and 16th centuries etc*
- *The Europe that faced the Islamic world in the 16th century was very different to the current world. Much of the continent today is based on Christian values, but no longer holds to Christianity as its faith. The rise of extremism in all faiths is a challenge.*

- *We are still learning to be tolerant – but have a tendency to unite against what is seen as a common danger or foe. The Transylvanian edict of tolerance was a practical response to a particular threat, not an intellectual unity between confessions.*
- *Different views were expressed about whether it is better to work towards two households living peaceably next to each, or to sharing one household. Assimilation or integration - and how are these both defined? What do we expect from migrants in our communities and what can we offer to them? What would make it easier to be a full member of society in the place or country where you live? Should someone coming into my 'household' be expected to renounce part of their identity or take on something of mine? Experience has been different at different times and in different countries.*
- *There was, however, agreement that politicians have responsibility for policy, but that Christians should be ready to hold them to account when people are not being treated with the mutual recognition that we are all created and loved by God. There is also a role for churches in providing support, respectful language and practical help such as language classes.*

Rev Lothar Schullerus. ‘Call for freedom: developing rural regions within Europe together.’

The call for freedom is often heard: freedom is as brilliant as a diamond and eagerly sought after – but what does it actually mean? Is it an illusion, or something that can be defined and achieved? Building on ideas of freedom from previous presentations, Lothar outlined the history of IRCA and its role as a voice for the voiceless.

There were deep transformations and changes in the world in the 1980s, with the Iron Curtain beginning to crack and possibilities for a better world order that would be safer and more free. At the same time, major negotiations (such as the GATT talks) were underway, with debates about free trade, the role of the market and the extent to which governments should intervene. The churches were concerned that economic progress that was concerned solely with financial profit would have serious consequences for wider human flourishing. Meetings were held in Stuttgart in 1987, and later in Hengrave Hall in England, which identified the need for a network of churches in rural areas to cope together with the evolution of this new world.

Further meetings were held in England, at the Arthur Rank Centre in 1993 and Durham in 1998, which looked at a structure for a worldwide network of rural churches. Existing organisations in North America, Australia and New Zealand were ready to link with the developing European network to share experiences of the changes in rural areas and the role of the Church. This led to the formation of the International Rural Churches Ecumenical Association (IRCEA) – later shortened to IRCA. Conferences held in Chennai (South India), Brandon (Canada), Altenkirchen (Germany) and Malawi broadened the membership and global perspective of IRCA. The organisation now has its own constitution, registered in Australia, and a number of regional groups, with IRCA-Europe being the first to be constituted (in Altenkirchen in 2010).

Over the years, IRCA has listened to the stories of the rural areas and provided a voice for those who are often not heard. Rural life is the voice of creation and important for society, it provides different perspectives and has different values. It should not be ignored or seen as a burden by government but as a benefit, able to provide an alternative vision of a sustainable life style and where the churches are able to offer transformation and renewal. ‘Eternity is born in the countryside.’

Questions and discussion followed about:

- *Ethics, economics and moral issues in providing cheaper food in a sustainable way. Less than 3% of the population is involved in agriculture in much of the world; it is not sensible to expect them to feed the rest of the population when farm-gate prices barely cover costs of production, and profits lie with ‘middle men’.*
- *Does large-scale agriculture affect rural spirituality as well as rural life and culture?*
- *How can we balance freedom of trade, sustainability and justice for small-scale producers, particularly in developing countries?*
- *The Hungarian Reformed Church has examples of practical ways to help and support its rural areas and congregations.*

A fuller history of the origins of IRCA can be found in ‘Die Stimme der Sprachlosen’ which can be obtained from Lothar Schullerus.

Jerry Marshall, President of IRCA and CEO of ARC. ‘Future perspectives for IRCA.’

The Arthur Rank Centre (ARC) is the UK rural churches resource centre, with a role of encouraging and equipping rural churches for their mission. Some of the resources are applicable more widely, and many can be downloaded free of charge from the ARC website or www.germinate.net

Jerry mentioned in particular

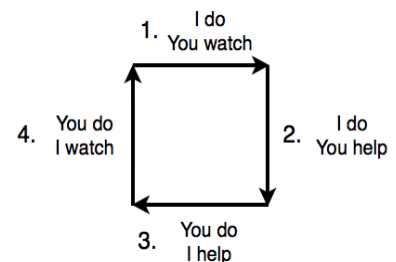
- Equipping for rural mission – four sessions to help the local church understand its context, resources and new opportunities.
- ‘Journey to faith’ – two sessions to help church members tell their story of faith.
- Germinate Enterprise – six two hour sessions to help people set up their own rural small businesses (helping with farm diversification and retaining employment in the countryside).
- Germinate Groups, providing affordable ‘learning communities’ for local church leadership groups to support one another in developing new plans.
- Conferences held every two years to encourage rural church leaders (280 attended in 2014), with ‘listening events’ in alternate years to discover what God is doing and identify gaps in provision that can be filled by working together.

Changes that affect rural church can be seen in all countries. The speed of change itself is a factor, continuing at an ever faster pace – such as in the fields of communication, business, technology, culture and views on ethical and moral issues. Society will continue to change, and will increasingly affect professionals as well as manual workers. Many rural areas appear to have escaped change, but the reality is rather different. Common challenges to rural life include movement to towns in search of work, high energy and transport costs, disappearance of public transport, local shops and services (and hence community meeting places), decline in direct agricultural employment, poor mobile / internet access, holiday homes for the wealthy affecting house prices and impacting community life, and churches closing or merging with other parishes under one priest.

However, there is also good news in and for rural areas. Poverty is falling in many areas (eg parts of rural India), mobile phones and internet access have been transformational in sub-Saharan Africa, and there is a new realisation that human flourishing requires more than just material wealth. Many places have found that declining numbers of clergy have led to different models of church, with lay people having a greater role in leadership, new ways of being church emerging (‘Fresh Expressions’) and new energy and resources being released. Church members are usually embedded in their communities and able to act as salt and light; and the Bible is now available in thousands of languages.

In the face of these changes, IRCA has a continuing role as a worldwide rural network and fellowship. Its role and purpose is:

1. To be a voice for the voiceless, speaking up for rural life, farming communities, marginalised groups in the countryside and rural and environmental values. This is done through advocacy, supporting and providing resources for rural churches to serve their communities,
2. To support the rural church, working with clergy and lay people to develop discipleship and new models of collaborative church leadership. The narrative of the rural church needs to be changed from a picture of decline: a small church works in a different way to a large church (just as ‘a satsuma is not a failure as an orange’ but a different fruit with its own characteristics, though clearly related to an orange). This has implications for training courses, provision of other resources and materials, and finding ways to raise the profile and perception of the rural church in Christian structures, colleges and the media. Jerry used the example of Jesus’ leadership style with the disciples, which moved from directive through to coaching, consensus and finally empowering. We need to adapt our leadership style according to each situation and the understanding of the congregation.
3. To support rural mission, through sharing resources, offering fellowship and support, and encouraging one another to be creative and take risks in communicating the Gospel in new ways rather than ‘playing safe by continuing a slow decline into obsolescence.’



When it is working well, nothing on earth is as powerful as the local church in bringing spiritual, social and physical blessing to its community.

IRCA's aims are to grow membership so that it has a more effective voice, hold conferences, use the website to share resources, increase the use of e-news, and find ways to engage with secular and church structures to act as an advocate for rural life and faith. The next conference will be held in Lincoln, New Zealand in 2018, and will have a learning community approach where church leaders will be asked to send at least three delegates. Fund raising to provide bursaries for attendance at the conference and for further development of the website is already underway.

The rural church needs to identify needs and resources, set realistic goals, be ready to work with others, discern God's way forward, take risks, communicate, keep on praying, be persistent, and remember that the fruit comes from God. Jerry urged all present to 'try one audacious new thing each year, enjoy the ride and believe that you can do it!'

Questions and discussion related to:

- *The speed of change and role of the Church, with concern that the West may be facing the disappearance of rural areas and cultures. In the UK, there is an idealised image of the countryside that urban people want to maintain, but this can conflict with the need for progress for those who actually live there!*
- *Goals to empower the rural church are not just adapted urban business plans. They ask us to listen to God, see opportunities, needs and resources, match them where we can, and be willing to work with others to build things that are of value for the kingdom of God, rather than creating businesses or building financial capital for their own sake.*
- *Rural people are used to change and risk – with farmers facing the greatest risks as they work with local and worldwide markets as well as the weather!*
- *Community cohesion is decreasing and people are less interested in faith. Some churches have been trying different strategies to be plausible and win people over. A better way is to look for natural contacts, work pastorally and listen to the needs and problems of people in the local context.*
- *We are moving from a generation that loved the church but was not particularly spiritual, to one that is interested in spirituality but does not look for it in the churches. We need to find new ways to communicate eternal values, model the Gospel and encourage people to live in freedom from guilt, building on what is creative and fun.*

Rev. Lothar Schullerus. 'Hope for East Asia'

Bishop Dr Prasada Rao had been unable to join the conference, and Lothar Schullerus gave a short presentation on his visit to Prasada in Chennai and the situation for Christians there. He brought greetings from the Church of South India, and also from Bishop Garry Hardingham from Australia, who had been present at the last IRCA-Europe Conference.

The church in India has a long history, with the first message of Christian faith being brought by the Apostle Thomas, who evangelised the sub-continent before his death from an injury in Madras (Chennai). The cathedral there is built on St Thomas' grave.

The old caste system operated for many hundreds of years, and restricted what each caste could do, in a static and ordered society. Pariahs or untouchables were beneath the lowest caste and not even allowed to drink water from the same wells as the other castes. They lived below minimum existence and were excluded from society; only the strongest were able to survive. Although the caste system was officially abolished in 1947, it still exists in many places. When the pariahs become Christians and are baptised into the church, they are freed from the restrictions of the caste system and given worth and value as human beings. Christians at present form about 2% of the population, and are more than 20.2 million in number.

Lothar described attending a Sunday morning church service with over 2,000 people spilling out of the building. 85 candidates were confirmed at another service, with a special cake provided by donations from the Sunday School. Youth events and services were enjoyed, and 300 people had been trained as youth leaders. In 2002, there had been tensions between Christians and Hindus, who had feared that a Christian / Muslim coalition could affect the political balance, but relationships have since improved. A new church is being built (and already in use) with resources from the people themselves rather than donations from outside.

The freedoms and opportunities that come from belonging to the Christian community are greatly valued, churches are full and growing and there is vivid faith and worship. It brought home the liberty of the Gospel in a new way: the outsider and untouchable is brought into the presence of God and set free to live a new life. We do not realise, in the West, what it is like to live with such barriers, and the joy that comes with freedom.

Round up of news from countries.

UK. Ann Wright and Jerry Marshall

Issues facing the rural church include demographic changes, a rural population that is ageing faster than the average, hidden poverty, loss of local services, and disproportionate numbers of holiday homes in some areas which affects community life. Farmers face common problems of low prices, high costs, loneliness and isolation, increasing legislation and the need to find new ways of working. In addition, some areas are still recovering from flooding over the winter, bovine TB is continuing to increase, and farming support networks are reporting high numbers of calls. However, the countryside remains a good place to live and rural churches are alive and well! In many cases they are at the cutting edge of finding new ways of being a Christian presence and relating to their communities; they are developing the role of lay people as the front line of the Church's mission, with clergy having more of an oversight role. Special events in national or local life (such as the Queen's 90th birthday), the seasons and the church year provide opportunities for making connections with people who rarely attend services, and encouraging them on their spiritual journey. The Arthur Rank Centre, working with the ecumenical Churches Rural Group, is able to support rural mission and ministry through its publications, website, resources and events - further information in Jerry's separate presentation.

Hungary. Attila Cocsis, Peter Kardos, Mihaly Sohajda

The Hungarian Reformed Church has 1,100 congregations, of whom around two-thirds live in rural areas. There are many small holdings, with some larger farms, but all suffering from low prices. The Church has been trying to find ways to help and support them. In 2013, the government introduced an employment scheme under which local groups, schools etc can apply for workers, who are paid a (low) wage by the government, but are gaining the self-esteem and experience that comes from having a job. Many churches are taking part in the scheme which is a good opportunity to help those who find it difficult to move into full time employment. Peter gave an example from his own church, and over 2,200 places will be available in the next financial year.

Hungarian Reformed Church Aid (HCA) works with this government scheme and also offers help and support through its own programmes. Founded in 2006, it now has four different areas of work: volunteering, emergency response and development, aid and Church for Farmers. The latter is a development programme for agricultural and rural areas, which includes working with local churches to provide space and set up farmers markets. The seed programme distributes, free of charge, over 3,000 € worth of seeds in communities where agriculture is developing, and to gypsy families. Each packet has 15 different kinds of seeds to provide fresh vegetables for a family of 5-6 people through the growing season. The project also provides tools, agricultural information and support. Other recent projects include two congregations working together to make and sell sausages, with the income used to buy more seeds. A nursery has agreed to provide fruit trees which HCA makes available free of charge to churches that apply under a state based agreement. Programmes and conferences for wine makers, plum growers etc have been held.

A positive recent development is that churches can go into schools with religious education more freely. This is a good change of policy, with more children attending RE and coming to churches.

Romania. Lazlo Gyula, Roger Parvu, Dietrich Galter

Lack of education adds to the impoverishment of rural communities. It is hard to attract teachers (and doctors) to rural areas, which increases their problems. Many children leave school without having gained minimum grades for employment, especially in rural Roma communities: this means that they have to find low paid jobs in the local community such as gardening or tourism. Church based projects work to improve agriculture, teach crafts such as blacksmithing, and help people to make and sell their own products. Small projects to integrate Roma children with the rest of the community have been piloted and are partly successful. Rural tourism around the fortified churches offers work and can be the main source of income. Some areas have no running water, but good internet access!

Changes in agriculture are occurring, with foreign individuals and enterprises now allowed to hold land. In some areas, large farms produce crops with little labour - but not for local consumption.

Urban areas are expanding rapidly, horizontally and vertically, and many peasant farmers are waiting for local towns to expand so that their land will become more valuable for industry or housing. The rural population is ageing with the flight of younger people into cities to find work in new industrial areas (such as in Sibiu). At the same time, second houses are bought in rural areas by people who do not live there permanently, and this affects the character of small communities. Country-based grandparents used to support families in the towns; now they are too old to do so, incomes in the cities are higher and families buy their food in the local markets. Older people in rural areas need help and support, and this is often provided by church volunteers. It feels as though rural areas are becoming 'cultural and tourist' areas, with the emphasis on providing green space and services for cities rather than taking the actual needs of rural residents into account in policy decisions.

On the positive side, churches are active in promoting the production and sale of regionally based goods in cities, offering space in their buildings and grounds for farmers and producers markets. These have benefited from increasing interest in 'slow food,' traditional agricultural practices and sustainable development, and help to build relationships and links between rural and urban areas. A recent law will increase the percentage of goods sold in shops that must come from within Romania from 25% to 65%, which will further help local producers. Prince Charles visits Romania regularly and supports initiatives in sustainable development that preserve rural culture and traditions.

Poland. Roman and Ewa Pawlas

Poland is still predominantly a rural country with many living off the land. Polish villages are strong politically, with political parties retaining connections to rural areas and agriculture. There is a very active folk tradition, but a need for greater local creativity. Rural areas are also very conservative in their faith – in all confessions. Changes are coming with help from EU funding, but churches need to find the right way to be involved. Opposition to change in villages can lead to them becoming increasingly poor and neglected, but in some areas new life comes from professionals, intellectuals and artists who move into a village in search of a better life. The two separate worlds have different priorities which can cause local problems, but there are examples of places where artists and sculptors bring creativity, income and new interests and skills for a village community. The church in each community is able to do what is needed for its own context.

Roman and Eva Pawlas also gave a brief outline of the 'Ecce Homo' awards which are given to those who have given outstanding service to others, and highlighted some of the recipients and their contribution to rural life.

Germany. Rolf Brauch

Baden, in common with other parts of Germany, has seen demographic changes that affect the rural areas, especially in the provision of health care and transport. New solutions and ideas need to be found to make rural areas attractive for people and there are discussions about how the churches can have an impact. Some options are to consolidate and reduce the number of buildings, to concentrate on core activities and to increase co-operation between communities – 'together is better.' Local solutions to the problems facing small communities are most effective. In Baden some areas remain stable, in others the population has decreased by between 15 and 30%, and understanding each local context is important. Other issues include thinking about our behaviour as consumers and the way this affects the environment, health of populations etc. Consumers have power to direct change by buying local products at a fair price.

There are questions about the future for small / family farms, who need to work together rather than remain as individual units. Germany is home to the biggest agricultural company in the world, as well as many very small farms with 40-50 cows. Niche markets or co-operative ventures are the way forward for smaller farmers. The churches are significant in helping farmers to adjust to changes in agricultural structures, and offer support for those with mental health issues, suicidal impulses etc. The church organisations also offer conflict resolution for disputes within families or between neighbours, industrial disputes and differences between milk producers and government agencies, for example. These are interesting times in which to live!