

**The Colourful Diversity of the Christian Faith**  
**International Rural Churches Association-Europe Conference, Sibiu 25-27 May 2016**

*The 500<sup>th</sup> 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 continue 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.’*

### **Presentation 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	Roman 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.

*Summaries of the keynote addresses and the reports from Germany Hungary, Poland, Romania and the UK are available from Ann Wright ([wright@btinternet.com](mailto:wright@btinternet.com)) and will be posted on the IRCA website.*