

# Ecumenical Partners and Meetings in Romania after 1989

*The republic of Romania, situated in South Eastern Europe, has a population of about twenty-two million inhabitants. Over 90% are Romanians, almost 7% Magyars, and the rest are of other ethnic origins.*

*Many years after the death of dictator Nicolae CEAUȘESCU, about a third of Romania's population still lives in poverty. 29% of the inhabitants in Romania are poor, 11% are very poor and 6% live under the poverty line. The minimum wage is rated at 70 EUR, whereas the minimum retirement pension is around 28 Euro.*

*In 1920, the region of Transylvania, after centuries of belonging to the Kingdom of Hungary, became part of Romania. It substantially increased the number of ethnic and religious minorities. There is a close kinship between ethnic identity and confessional membership.*

*Nowadays millions of Romanians live in the diaspora: 500.000 in Spain, 600.000 in Germany, mostly married to ethnic Germans, who left Romania in the 1980s and 1990s. Many ethnic Magyars also live abroad.*

*The effects of the crumbling social welfare system are particularly felt by the elderly, ill, disabled, Roma<sup>1</sup> people and those with large families. Romania has been a member of NATO since 2004 and it joined the European Union (EU) in 2007.*

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1 The normal UK spelling is Roma, but the Roma in Romania insist that their name is spelled as Rroma.



## **I. Four Ecumenical Partners**

### **1. Romanian Orthodox Church (ROC)**

86,7 % of ethnic Romanians are Orthodox and, by that, the ROC is amply the majority church. The church has been autocephalous since 1885 and was organized as a Patriarchate in 1925. There are five Metropolitan Sees, ten Archdioceses and thirteen Dioceses.

The highest authority for all dogmatic and canonical issues, as well as for religious matters of any other kind is the Holy Synod. 12.173 priests and deacons serve 12.761 parishes and branches. There are fourteen faculties of theology with 10.178 students (in 2004). 438 priests function in hospitals, the army, prisons and social centres.

### **2. (Magyar) Calvinist-Reformed Church**

This church of ethnic Magyars is based in Transylvania and numbers about 700.000 believers (3,2% of the population), has two bishops and is divided into two districts, Cluj (Kolozsvár) with 486 parishes and Oradea (Nagyvárad) with two hundred sixty communities.

The church came into being in the XVIth century, during the Reformation. There is a theological training centre in Cluj. Training and education play an important role maintaining the cultural and church inheritance.

For centuries Magyars have almost only married Magyars. The church has to deal with a double minority position: religious as well as ethnic. The number of Protestant and Roman Catholic Magyars is about the same.

### 3. (German) Evangelical-Lutheran Church

This Lutheran church is based in Transylvania and represents a small ethnic German minority with a rich cultural and historical heritage. The church has one bishop and some 15.000 members, mostly elderly people. There are 260 communities and the services nowadays are in German or bilingual, German and Romanian.

In Sibiu (Hermannstadt, Nagyszeben), there is a theological institute with about thirty students. The church has been *decimated* in a very short period. 90% of the ethnic Germans moved to Germany, mainly in the 1980s and 1990s. The church is no longer able to finance itself or to provide services in all its parishes, though it fulfils a bridging function in ecumenical relations.

### 4. (Magyar) Synodal-Presbyterian Evangelical-Lutheran Church

This church is also based in Transylvania with thirty-nine parishes, sixteen diaspora points in the country and one bishop. The services are mainly in Magyar, but also in German and Slovakian languages.

It has a double minority status, denominational and ethnical. But there is one Romanian speaking Evangelical-Lutheran congregation in Bucureşti. The church has approximately 30.000 members.

## II. Six Interchurch Meetings after the Changes

### 1. Sibiu (1990): Interchurch Cooperation

The first meeting took place in 1990 at the Orthodox theological institute in Sibiu in Transylvania. The subject of the discussion was to create a platform for better and more efficient interchurch cooperation.

Another focus was on the establishment of a National Council of Churches and an Interconfessional Bible Society (IBS). The period under the Communist dictatorship was acknowledged to have had good ecumenical cooperation.<sup>2</sup>

There is some confusion whether Sibiu or Novi Sad should be regarded as the first new kind of ecumenical meeting in Romania. The statement of Novi Sad also refers to “the first time under freedom.”

### 2. Novi Sad (1990): Sincere Repentance

In 1990, representatives of Christian denominations in Romania and Hungary met on the invitation of the CEC and in cooperation with

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the WCC in the former Yugoslavia. The participants present at this meeting belonged to the Evangelical-Lutheran, Calvinist-Reformed, Baptist and Orthodox confessions.

The Free Churches or Neo-Protestant denominations (the Pentecostals, Baptists and Adventists) had grown strongly in those years, and they were then over half a million in their numbers. The joint statement expressed the following.

These churches recently passed through a dark period of totalitarian atheistic Communism, which flagrantly infringed their freedoms and impeded the proper fulfilment of their mission; now for the first time in decades they have the freedom to speak openly. That meeting constituted a first step towards finding the best ways to help the rapprochement and the creation of a new relationship between their peoples.

They were aware of the realities in their countries and were cognizant of the recent past, when denominations could not fulfil their calling as they would have wished. They deeply regretted, in a spirit of sincere repentance, all the past failures and compromises.

The statement continued in affirming that the denominations must seek to help each other and to purify their conscience of any kind of selfishness, intolerance and chauvinism. All forms of extremism were rejected; the present borders between Romania and Hungary were respected.

Also, an atmosphere which encouraged all to feel at home in their own country was to be created; all peoples and ethnic minorities in their countries must have equal rights and the possibility to practice their own culture in their own schools, in all cultural institutions, and at all other levels of life.

The rights of minorities were declared as sacred and inalienable, the creation of a new irenic spirit between the denominations had to be worked out and enemy images had to be properly corrected.

To their great regret, the denominations in Romania were often forced to keep silent and could not condemn the violation of human rights and ethnic minorities. A commitment was made that if any denomination were to be hurt in its religious or ethnic rights, other denominations had to manifest their support and solidarity.

A real tension was the slow reaction of governments to give back the nationalised church properties and institutions. The statement ended with a commitment to convene further meetings of this character and with the hope that other churches in Romania and Hungary also might become involved.

The future was in the hands of God, but the statement was also seen as a first step in a process of reconciliation and healing. At the end of this meeting, the Romanian churches declared that they wanted to continue the process *without* direct CEC or CEC staff assistance.

### 3. Iași (1991): Healing, Education and Diakonia

The next meeting, again with international participation, was held in the capital of Moldavia in 1991. One notes with concern that the confidence among denominations was deteriorating and a real reconciliation was not achieved.

The establishment of an ecumenical platform was dropped. The denominations had to deal with the national situation of transition and renewal. Christian education and diakonia were formulated as common priorities.

Also, a substantial need for moral, ethical and spiritual healing was pointed out. Therefore new forms of training for professors, school systems and religious education were said to be needed.<sup>3</sup>

### 4. București (1994): Fraternity under the Cross

In 1994, a meeting was organized in the capital of Romania at the invitation of Konrad RAISER, General Secretary of WCC, and in cooperation with CEC. There were not only representatives of the member churches of the WCC and CEC, but also of other churches (Baptist Union, Adventists Union, Greek Catholic, Pentecostal, Roman Catholic, and Evangelical denominations), and the ecumenical association AIDRom.

*Ajutor Interbisericesc* Departmentul Romania (Interchurch Aid Department in Romania) was renamed in 1993 to *Asociatia Ecumenica a Bisericilor din Romania* (Ecumenical Association of Churches in Romania).

AIDRom was an ecumenical organisation created in 1991 as an instrument of the Calvinist-Reformed, Evangelical-Lutheran and Orthodox churches, following the downfall of the Nicolae CEAUȘESCU regime.

AIDRom started as a channel for the distribution of aid. The WCC and other funding agencies played a key role by providing both human resources and funds. In 1993 AIDRom was officially registered as an Ecumenical Association of Churches in Romania.

At the meeting of 1994 in București, Konrad RAISER referred to

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the Novi Sad meeting in 1990 on ecumenical relations in Romania. Since then, WCC and CEC have contributed to the establishment of AIDRom, which has brought the Orthodox and Protestant member churches closer together.

After the meeting in Novi Sad, the church leaders gathered regularly to discuss their common concerns. The WCC and CEC wanted to encourage this process and include the other churches also, because there were many unresolved problems.

The purpose was to evaluate the situation and to see what could be done to promote ecumenical cooperation. It was an occasion for mutual consultation, interpretation and articulation of difficulties and grievances. Each participant could express the main concerns of her or his church.

The (German) Evangelical-Lutheran Church mentioned the immense exodus of people of German origin to Germany in the 1980s and 1990s after the changes. During this time, 75% of the German population had emigrated.

So, the church has become a small minority, though it represents a rich cultural and historical heritage of eight hundred years of Saxon settlement in Transylvania. The mission of a minority church is to be a bridge and to promote an open and sincere dialogue. It wants to preserve its identity, however, and it is afraid of getting *squeezed* by larger churches.

The (Magyar) Evangelical-Lutheran Church expressed that many of the expectations of December 1989 have not been fulfilled. The present era was not a *dream*, but fraught with many problems.

The Orthodox Metropolitan DANIEL of Iași expressed his point of view on ecumenism and stated that ecumenism was in a crisis. During the Cold War, denominations inside the Communist block had limited freedom, and ecumenism was a necessity and a chance to communicate with the outside world.

It was a *fraternity under the cross*. Ecumenical meetings and conferences were frequent, but rather formal and limited to making official declarations. The policy of the state was to diminish the social role of the Church.

Ecumenical cooperation remained equally important, not for survival but for involvement in society. AIDRom is a good example of practical ecumenism. The Orthodox church has worked hard to re-establish its social role.

The most difficult part was the struggle to reintroduce religious instruction in the public schools. The ROC was fighting to get back the confiscated properties, but success has been rather limited.

The state had agreed to grant some subsidies, and other denominations also benefited from this. For example, all the theological schools were subsidized by the state. But the practical, local cooperation between the denominations was episodic and insufficient.

The reasons were denominationalism, proselytism, defensive attitudes; nationalism of majority and minority churches; and differing interests and problems. There was a need for new ecumenical education and analyses. Priority had to be with the suffering in society, not with the interests of the denominations.

The (Magyar) Calvinist-Reformed church mentioned that, after 1989, the student, youth and women's movements of the church had been organized again. The church wanted to establish its own schools, but the legal provisions for confessional schools were still lacking.

In the area of diakonia, many projects had been set up. Through the restitution of its properties, the Church wanted to improve its material situation. Some students and young people were involved in interdenominational activities. For them it was easier to find a *common language*.

The small Armenian Apostolic church (about 4000 believers) reported that its communities never received help from abroad. After 1989, the parishes opened Sunday schools and kindergartens. The restitution of properties was a priority for the Church. The relations with the ROC were excellent, and there was also good collaboration with the other denominations.

The spokesperson of the Roman Catholic church stated that the personal relations between Roman Catholic and Orthodox clergy could be friendly, but in official discussions there had been bitter fights.

It was interesting that the international Orthodox–Roman Catholic dialogue seemed to be easier than the dialogue at the national level. The Church advocated religious education in public schools.

But the society in general lacked ideals. The spokesperson hoped that the meeting helped to establish an open and serene dialogue. If invited for future meetings, the Roman Catholic church would be present. Practical ecumenism was also needed.

According to Jean FISCHER, secretary general of CEC, three issues emerged from the discussion: Church–state relations, religious education, and local interchurch relations.

Bishop MÓZES Árpád of the (Magyar) Evangelical-Lutheran church said that the restitution of properties indeed was a common problem, but for the minority churches it was even a matter of survival.

He expressed his opinion that the meeting was indeed meant

to discuss common problems, but also questions on which the denominations were divided, for only in this way could the dialogue be fruitful.

It was true that other denominations had benefited from the results obtained by the ROC, but regarding religious education it was different, because the smaller denominations could not gather enough children to set up classes.

The spokesperson of the Evangelical churches expressed that in a Christian spirit all problems can be solved. He expressed that the Romanian society needed the denominations very much. In contrast to scientific progress, there was a heavy moral decline. Evangelisation has nothing to do with proselytism, and is not a search for power.

Konrad RAISER advised a focus on the question of education, which was shown to be a common major concern. The representatives talked about the three different aspects present in the discussion. One was religious education in public schools, the other was the confessional schools, and the third was education in the Church. These facets should not be seen as alternatives, but as complementary.

In the discussion, the theme of the family was mentioned as well as the importance of the family in relation to religious education and ethical issues. Metropolitan DANIEL of Iași proposed to organize an interchurch meeting on the Christian family. Some encouraging examples of cooperation between Orthodox and Evangelicals in a prison and a hospital were mentioned.

Konrad RAISER said the meeting had been a genuinely ecumenical discussion. Concerning legislation, he added that if some Western models could be of help, these could be made available through AIDRom. CEC and WCC would continue to assist the Romanian denominations.

## **5. București (1996): Transforming Communities**

In 1996, the Presidium of CEC gathered in București. They met representatives of the member churches in Romania. Knowing the very specific problems confronting CEC in Romania, an additional initiative was taken by sending visitors from staff and presidium to Cluj, Oradea and Sibiu in Transylvania.

Such visits took place because CEC had received correspondence from member churches, raising awareness that they were experiencing problems caused by the lack of legislation on Church and state affairs in connection with education law and restitution of property.

The CEC had also been accused of neglecting the interests of minority churches. Jean FISCHER, president of the CEC staff, replied that this charge was not acceptable. The small CEC staff spends much time visiting member churches in fifty-two countries of Europe.

The representatives confirmed the problems with the state. In addition, Calvinist-Reformed voices mentioned the state support for new church buildings of the ROC and they expected better support from the ROC to get these problems settled.

The ROC also already received back some buildings from the state. Metropolitan Nifon (MIHAITA) of the ROC, who is currently president of AIDRom, said that, similar to other denominations in Romania, the Orthodox were faced with fascinating times—it was a transitional period.

The joy of freedom soon passed away, but it is better to have freedom than not. The problems raised by the other denominations were the same for the ROC. He was surprised about the allegations that the ROC was not cooperating in getting a religious law enacted, for this was as important to the Orthodox as to any other denomination.

The reports of the visits to Transylvania showed the following picture. In Oradea there were many wounded feelings among the ethnic Magyars: people are hurt and not heard. The issue of belonging to a minority arose.

There was disappointment with the ecumenical movement, both national and international, towards WCC and CEC also. But one encountered strong ecumenical relations at the local level, the churches were full during the Week of Prayer.

The denominations were facing diaconal challenges, and the need for diaconal work and training was enormous. Diaconal training in order to *transform communities* had to receive ecumenical support.

In Cluj, the Orthodox–Protestant relations seemed to be correct, but were not very dynamic. Roman Catholics seemed to be remote from local ecumenical life. But there were ecumenical opportunities for diaconal service, and many young people attended the churches.

One could attend performances of joint choirs of the Orthodox and Protestant seminaries. The Week of Prayer demonstrated a commitment to ecumenism, but services and prayers were still largely organized along confessional lines.

In Sibiu, the ecumenical relationships were generally good at the local and national level. One of the reasons was that the quantity of the German-speaking Evangelical-Lutheran church was negligible.

There were no organised structural ecumenical activities such as

Week of Prayer. The relations between the lecturers of the Orthodox and Evangelical-Lutheran theological faculties were good.

The meeting in București demonstrated that the issues at stake, such as the restitution of properties and a law on Church and state relations as well as on education, were problematic and difficult.

They were seen differently by the member churches. Their resolutions called for serious and continued dialogue between and within the denominations. It was not likely that an external force would bring a solution to such difficult problems.

The denominations had to give themselves a proper structure for regular and permanent consultation and common positions, and they had to strengthen their relationships with the government.

There was a more needed than implied peaceful co-existence between the denominations. Active cooperation and demonstrations of unity had to be built on what had already been achieved between the various confessions.

## 6. Iași (1998): Theology in Ecumenical Thought

In 1998 an important seminar took place on the theme: *The Ecumenical Movement in the XXth century: The Role of Theology in Ecumenical Thought and Life in Romania*. This seminar, actually the first real theological meeting after the changes, was jointly organized by the WCC and Metropolitan DANIEL of Iași (Moldavia).

Part one of this significant conference concentrated on the existence of fifty years of the WCC. At that very moment, an acute crisis arose between the Orthodox and Protestant denominations within WCC.

Part two focused on ecumenism in Romania. It included a critical survey of the past and endorsed the present initiatives for a new movement towards ecumenism as a duty to overcome the shame and the tragedy of division.

The acute problem of the relationship between Church and state was also tackled. Some characteristics of ecumenism in Romania were formulated. The period under political repression led to positive results for the deepening of sisternal and fraternal relations.

The theological interconfessional conferences were exceptional moments in the Romanian ecumenical movement. From 1990 on, one could talk of ecumenism under freedom, which meant a bigger responsibility for the denominations.

The relationship between Christians became more open. This implied actions to intensify ecumenism at the national, regional and local levels with the goal of reconciliation and Christian union.

The difficulties within the framework of the ecumenical dialogue after the changes were reduced to the lack of information as well as to an inadequate strategy regarding ecumenical awareness.

Two initiatives were launched. The first initiative called for the establishment of chairs of ecumenism at all schools of theology where they do not currently exist as well as the teaching of all other disciplines in an ecumenical spirit.

The second initiative advocated the development of an ecumenical atmosphere, also at the local community level. Local churches were asked to commit themselves to an educational project for believers.

In order to realize this program, it was mentioned once again that a *National Council of Churches* should be established in which the Roman Catholic church hopefully would participate fully; but the goal to establish a National Council of Churches in 2006 was not accomplished.

The main goals of the Council were formulated as well: first, re-starting the theological interconfessional conference; then elaborating on a Romanian ecumenical theology related to the international theological discourse as well to the Romanian context; also, issuing an ecumenical memorial to the martyrs of faith during the Communist period.

Additional goals included promoting the Week of Prayer, setting up pastoral care for ecumenical marriages and inter-church families, exchanging professors and students of theological faculties and, finally, organizing regional meetings among communities.

In spite of all inevitable temporary difficulties, the ecumenical movement in Romania has a future. In order to achieve this, the reinforcement of the inter-theological conferences is one of the principle *building stones*.<sup>4</sup>

### III. AIDRom: Church, State and Society

*AIDRom* was created in 1991 as an instrument of the Protestant and Orthodox denominations following the downfall of the Nicolae *CEAUȘESCU* regime. *AIDRom* started as a channel for the distribution of aid, but in 1993 officially registered as an Ecumenical Association of Churches in Romania.

The three founding members were the ROC, the Magyar Calvinist-Reformed Church and the German Evangelical-Lutheran Church. In 1994 two new churches joined the association: the Synodal

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Presbyterian (Evangelical-Lutheran) Church and the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Since 1995, the staff of AIDRom has been completely Romanian, and one of the presidents of the board was the Orthodox archbishop Nifon MIHAITA of Targoviste. AIDRom has generally been known for ecumenism through *diakonia*, including work among Roma people and street children as well educational projects for minorities and human rights.

Later on, AIDRom accepted some responsibilities towards the creation of a National Council of Churches. At the meeting with the CEC in București in 1996, Christian TEODORESCU, the Evangelical-Lutheran director of AIDRom, said that for the time being the association had not been able to function properly as a platform for interchurch dialogue, nor as a proper spokesperson to the state on behalf of the churches.

Bishop MIHAITA (AIDRom) added that the Ecumenical Association was not a proper platform empowered by denominations to discuss these questions. But it is a blessing because it exists, and at the yearly General Assembly items from member churches are raised without hesitation.

The Round Table structure functions as a platform, but AIDRom is not yet a National Council of Churches. The ROC has asked other churches about forming a NCC. Until this is created, AIDRom continues to fulfil that function to some extent.

Meanwhile, the mandate of AIDRom has been revised in the sense that it is now also dealing with theological matters. It has a Department of Ecumenical Formation which is focusing on the subjects of ecumenical prayer, inter-theological conferences, and theological and ecumenical education.

The objectives of ecumenical prayer (Week of Prayer and World Day of Prayer) are to express a common witness as Christians in a divided world and to organize these opportunities for common prayer.

The objectives of inter-theological conferences are to restart theological dialogue, to take care of a local contribution to worldwide ecumenical themes, to establish a permanent Ecumenical Working Group on specific subjects like the Charta Oecumenica and the properties of the denominations, to cope with past and present, to promote religious education and to organize comparative church history conferences.

Also, theological and ecumenical education is its task, in which ethnic reconciliation is seen as a priority. In *Training for Transformation*

workshops, women and men of different denominational and ethnic groups meet in dialogue.

The association AIDRom became a National Council in 2006, with the Roman Catholic church as a full member. During his visit in Germany in 2003, Patriarch TEOCTIST stated that “AIDRom will be transformed into a larger organization such as a Council of Churches that could offer a sisterly cooperation platform for all denominations.”<sup>5</sup>

Mihail BRINZEA, an Orthodox executive of AIDRom, explained that “there are some distinct avowals of denominations on the issue of ecumenical life, but in Romania, ecumenism was achieved so far not through common declaration and statements, but via co-operation, and this probably will be valid also for the future.”

A good example for sustaining this was the last Charta Cœcumenica seminar organized by AIDRom in Brasov in 2003, where the delegates of different confessions decided together to fix the yearly event date of 29 June as a Day of Prayer for each other.

Besides a CEC delegation, there were representatives from most of the historical Romanian churches. Among them were many young Orthodox theologians discussing their responsibilities emerging from the Charta Cœcumenica.

Another decision of the seminar in Brasov was to initiate a Romanian ecumenical Church Congress in 2005, according to the model of the *Kirchentag* in Germany. The bishops of the Roman Catholic church and the Greek Catholic church fully accepted the text of the Charta, which was discussed with both priests and believers.

The level of discussion and reception is similar in the Calvinist-Reformed and Evangelical-Lutheran Churches of Romania. In 2003 the Evangelical Academy of Sibiu and AIDRom hosted an international ecumenical conference entitled *Church, State and Society*.

The conference was included in the series of ecumenical meetings organized in Romania at various levels, and emphasized the perspectives of the future common dialogue. Items such as religious freedom in Western democracies and the reflection of this in Central and Eastern European countries jurisprudence were discussed.

Also, the development of the relationship between Church and state in South Eastern Europe and the relationship between Church and state from the perspective of the Romanian state were discussed. The government representatives underlined the importance of this

<sup>5</sup> Newsletter of AIDRom 2003/2. 1.

conference for the integration of Romania into the European Union (EU).

Thirteen years after the establishment of AIDRom, its mandate has been changed relating to the developments in Church and society. In the midst of the 1990s, there was not yet the intention to provide AIDRom with the tasks some voices (CEC) were asking for.

Gradually, the association started to develop more theological initiatives. AIDRom can be seen as the main ecumenical structural body of Romania in which the Protestant and Orthodox confessions fully participate.

#### **Suggested Reading**

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