



Position paper

**The Relationship of the Swiss Evangelical Alliance  
to the Roman Catholic Church – Summary theses**

# 500 years after the Reformation



Supporting **COMMUNITY**

Changing **SOCIETY**

Sharing **FAITH**

## Summary theses

The detailed arguments are found in the larger version. There is also a third version that includes substantial appendices and references.

### Thesis 1:

**Our coexistence to this time has been characterized by ambiguities and burdened by disagreements.**

For many people, the term "ecumenism" is very controversial. This term has often been identified with the theological course of the World Council of Churches in Geneva (WCC), which has often been determined by a certain political and ideological bias that cannot be combined with what we perceive to be a consistently biblical point of view. Many associate the word "ecumenism" with a lack of biblical clarity, with which the Swiss Evangelical Alliance (SEA) cannot identify. Also, the fact that some people have associated the term with the cause of unifying the world religions has heightened suspicion that the term is not helpful to clarify the biblical concerns of the SEA. However, the SEA can unreservedly affirm the profoundly biblical goal of "spiritual unity" among all Christians. In this document, the term "ecumenism" is only used in this sense.

Until this time, the stance toward the Roman Catholic Church within the SEA has been marked by a distinct ambivalence. On the one hand, it was and is undisputed that the fundamental confessional differences between the churches of the Reformation and the Roman Catholic Church, which have existed since the sixteenth century, have not yet been eliminated, despite all efforts to bring them closer together. On the other hand, there have been differing assessments of the current relationship between the SEA and the Catholic Church. While some consider a distanced or even negative relationship with the Roman Church to be appropriate because of the continuing differences, others, despite the differences, consider the collaboration of the SEA with the Roman Catholic Church in a common witness to the gospel and the commandments of God to be, at least in some cases, possible or even required.

### Thesis 2:

**The New Testament testimony obliges us to seek Christian unity.**

The division of Christians has negative consequences, among others:

- A betrayal of the bequest of Jesus that Christians should be one, as Christ and the Father are one (John 17:23; cf. Romans 12:4f; Ephesians 4:4)
- An impediment to mission and evangelism (Matthew 28:18-20; John 17:21; 13:35)
- A weakening in the face of worldwide discrimination and persecution (1 Corinthians 12:24-26)
- An outrage and an unbelievable testimony to the world

The biblical preconditions for visible unity of the church(es) are as follows:

- Unity in truth (John 14:6; 16:13; Galatians 1)
- Unity in love (John 13:35; 17:20-23; 2 Corinthians 5:14)
- Unity in freedom (2 Corinthians 3:17)

### Thesis 3:

**Despite differences, there are significant common convictions.**

Although there are still considerable doctrinal differences between the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant national and free churches (e.g., regarding the doctrine of the Pope, of Mary, of the saints, of the Church, and of the sacraments), there are several reasons to redefine the relationship with the Roman Church now, some 500 years after the Reformation.

Thus, for example, in the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the Roman Catholic Church gave up the claim to be the exclusive mediator of salvation. And in the "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" (between the Roman Catholic Church and representatives of the Lutheran churches), the

Catholic Church agreed that a person is righteous before God through Christ alone, through grace alone, and through faith alone. There is also a high degree of agreement on ethical issues between theologically conservative Protestant Christians and groups and the Roman Catholic Church.

**Thesis 4:**

**The intensity of the cooperation depends heavily on the local situation, as well as on the believers and the local churches participating.**

Whether or not, how, and the intensity of cooperation and fellowship between the SEA and other churches depends on the local situation. These situations can be very different. Fundamental fears of contact are just as misplaced as an urgency that cannot wait and thereby robs others of freedom.

Despite the theological urgency of a New Testament-based unity and the serious struggle for commonality, there must never be a compulsion in these questions that ignores the concerns of conscience and the human, spiritual, and theological limitations of the local situation.

An externally visible and structural unity must arise from inner spiritual-theological unity; otherwise it will quickly become a mere outward appearance that pretends to be a unity that does not really exist. The action of the Holy Spirit must always take precedence over human activity and organization. It is all-important that the peace of Christ and the Spirit of truth, which give freedom, must govern, so that the Father may be glorified in everything. However, this inner spiritual unity also needs room in which it can be experienced and cultivated.

The SEA recommends that all its members seek collaboration with all Christian churches at the local level and that we cultivate these relationships. Warm personal contact and gracious relationships should be the least we expect of ourselves. Our goal should

be that trust and brotherly love develop and grow in mutual respect for each other's differences and distinctives, which all churches have to bear with patience and humility.

The extent to which common prayer, joint activities, or cooperative projects can arise from such relationships must be decided by the respective leaders based on the particular situation.

The differences in the understanding of the church have hitherto prevented institutional unity. However, unity in cooperation within the SEA is not church unity and therefore does not require the same degree of agreement as is the case of mutual church recognition.

**Thesis 5:**

**Cooperation for a common witness can take different shapes.**

**a. Participation in public events and in institutions**

In places where there is the possibility of having a public word alternating with representatives of other churches (such as media, public events, nursing or retirement homes, or hospitals), these should be shared. Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Evangelical churches should demonstrate cooperation.

**b. Common testimony in society – selective cooperation**

Local and regional humanitarian and social aid can be provided jointly. Examples include food and clothing distribution; emergency shelter; addiction prevention and care; counseling regarding pregnancy, marriage, and family; street ministry; care for the elderly; and support for the unemployed. Public initiatives (such as defending persecuted Christians, distributing Bibles, or addressing foundational ethical questions) have a greater impact if representatives of all Christians participate.

### c. Joint devotions, prayer meetings, worship services, and the Lord's Supper

The experience of "Christ in the other", whether in private, at prayer meetings, at worship services, or at public formal events, offers the opportunity to take each other seriously in spite of our differences and to appreciate the other. It is no longer a question of looking only at what has separated us for centuries, but, conversely, of placing in the foreground what is common among us, namely the incarnate God in Jesus Christ, with his life, work, death, and resurrection. Occasional participation in the worship services of the other church, especially in the context of family solidarity and fostering friendship, should be regarded as normal.

Joint participation with Catholics in the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper is evaluated differently among members of the SEA. Such joint participation is left to the individual's assessment and conscience.

### d. Evangelization<sup>1</sup>

In the 2011 statement "Christian Mission in a Multi-Religious World", jointly signed by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, the World Council of Churches, and the World Evangelical Alliance, our common concern for mission is articulated in a manner that contributes to both internal church discussions and public discussions surrounding evangelism.

The following applies: Common evangelism requires a common commitment to and understanding of the same biblical gospel. Protestant Christians sometimes perceive certain themes to be lacking in Catholic proclamation, especially the sufficiency of the redemption achieved by Jesus on the cross, once for all, and the access to it solely by faith alone and by

grace alone, without the necessity of other means of salvation. Conversely, some Catholic Christians do not deny the value of the evangelistic message preached by Evangelicals, but from their perspective, they find that important aspects of the gospel are missing in it. In particular, they stress the necessity to live the gospel in the sacramental life of the (Roman Catholic) Church and to recognize the teaching authority of the (Roman Catholic) Church.

As long as both sides regard the understanding of the gospel of the other side as deficient in serious points, there is a significant obstacle to overcome.

Nevertheless, the SEA believes that joint evangelism is possible, depending on the local situation, if agreement is found regarding practical issues. The SEA knows from practical experience, for example, of joint courses about the faith that have been successfully held.

#### Thesis 6:

**The name, logo, and identity of the "Evangelical Alliance" must continue to be safeguarded.**

For some unions of churches, church federations at the canton level, and communities, close cooperation with the Roman Catholic Church is already a reality in many spheres. This raises the question of whether it would not be necessary to change the name "Evangelical Alliance" and the respective logo. The SEA recommends not deviating from the current name and logo, which is used by all our members. The strength of the "Evangelical Alliance" can be seen in its joint national and international appearance. In many places, the logo is perceived and accepted as a seal of quality. We would lose this unity if the name and logo were changed. The vocation of the Swiss Evangelical Alliance is to offer a common platform for unions of churches, local churches, works, and persons who recognize themselves as having an evangelical identity and confession of faith. The name "Evangelical Alliance" makes this part of Christianity visible, especially in French-speaking Switzerland.

<sup>1</sup> Some of the key documents on this theme are "The Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission" (1985) and the WEF Manila Declaration: "The Unique Christ in a Pluralistic World" (1992), part 9. See also part 2 of "Church, Evangelization, and the Bonds of Koinonia" (2002), which appears in the appendices to this paper.

The SEA recommends making local unity visible in a way that does not change our name or logo. Both long-term and short-term cooperation can be communicated through a line such as, "A cooperative effort of the Evangelical Alliance and the Roman Catholic Church" (or a particular Catholic parish or diocese). The logos of all the participating churches or organizations could then be added.

**Thesis 7:****Guest status is possible, membership conceivable.**

The SEA extends the possibility of guest status in our local alliances to Roman Catholic parishes, including participation in local EA meetings and SEA events, especially for exchange and dialogue.

From the perspective of the SEA, full membership of Roman Catholic parishes in the SEA and our local alliances could be considered if those parishes can identify with the principles, beliefs, and goals of the SEA. Whether they would want full SEA membership is a question that must be left to them to be decided in light of the Roman Catholic understanding of the Church.

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