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THE 'DOG' NEXT DOOR!

Whilst it is with great sadness that we have learned of the imminent departure from our midst of Pastor Uli Stefan, who is moving on to pastures new in Switzerland, I am sure all who knew him and grew to love and respect him wish him and his wife Ursula God speed and good luck.

I am sure I speak for us all when I offer them both our warmest and most humble thanks for all they have done during the years spent among us.

Pastor Stefan has very kindly written the following farewell message for us, a message of hope, tolerance and brotherly love – virtues which he has constantly shown to all.

WGS

It is now almost eleven years since I arrived in London on a foggy November day in 1965. I had been consecrated for the ministry of the Protestant Church at the Muenster of Berne only a few weeks before, and the practical course in a Bernese parish under the supervision of an older minister was the only experience I had had in the field I was supposed to work in. The immigration officer on the boat didn't seem to believe me and he only gave me permission to stay in England for one month.

In a way he was right to mistrust me; I had a lot of theories in my head and a few strong prejudices in my heart. The work in the Swiss Church during all these years taught me one lesson – that life is a constant challenge and that one has never finished learning what it means to live as a Christian in the world of today.

I remember well the words of the late Prof. H. Duerr, who told me when he bid me farewell: "How lucky you are to go to England! You will find many opportunities to make fruitful contacts with all sorts of denominations like the Methodists, the Anglicans, the Baptist Church, the URC etc. Have a good time!"

This sounded like a blessing of the father to his spiritual son. And so often blessings are for a long time not understood by those who have received them. They are even opposed and neglected. But by their inner power they prove to be stronger.

During the first years, my poor knowledge of the English language prevented me from discovering the riches of the different denominations over here. Towards my own kind, the Swiss Catholics, there was a barrier of a deep prejudice. It is the fear which sits in the hearts of many of our compatriots young and old. The fear of the others, in this case the other denomination, be it Catholic or Protestant or any other creed.

Defence is just the other side of self-righteousness: I am right, the others are completely wrong. In my case I had heard of many errors of the Catholics and this nourished my prejudice. If the others were so wrong of course we were right. But mind you, so I was told, Rome is tremendous strong and if you offer them your little finger they will take the whole hand. So watch it.

There seemed to be an unsurmountable wall between the two camps. I think I was glad the wall was there. It saved me the trouble to get down to the problem of the mere existence of the other group of Christians. It was so easy

to sit behind the imaginary wall and accuse the other of heresy. In a way I behaved like the fierce dog in our neighbour's garden. Day by day he would sit behind the fence guarding his quarters.

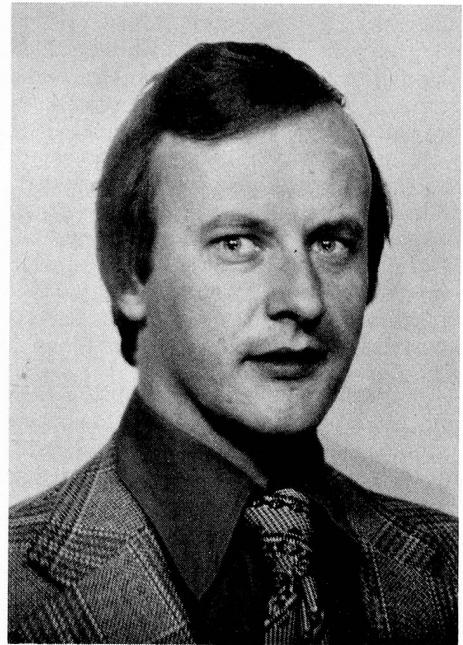
Whenever somebody appeared on the other side, he started barking most furiously. Thank God there was a fence. Otherwise something terrible would happen. But on a stormy day the fence was blown down by a strong wind. The access to the garden next door was wide open. Nothing terrible happened. Instead of attacking the passers-by the dog withdrew, tail between his legs, into the farthest corner of his territory, watching cautiously with one eye the people on the other side.

This is what happened to us as well. The fence of prejudices was blown down by the wind which I would like to call the Spirit of God. Step by step we were brought nearer to each other and we discovered the amazing fact that there were more things which we have in common than separating ones.

Cautiously we started to have Communal Services together. Today we offer ecumenical services for the young people at the Youth Centre almost every Sunday evening and once a month (on the third Sunday) in the morning, a Service for the Resident Swiss at the Eglise Suisse. After many a meeting a new constitution was worked out by the ministers and some members of the Youth Club, which found the approval of the Consistoire of the Protestant Swiss Church and the Committee of Swiss Catholics.

Thus the Swiss Youth Club is now firmly based on ecumenical principles. And since a few weeks, the Services on Sunday evenings can be celebrated in the Ecumenical Chapel at the John Southworth Centre, which was built with substantial help of the two Churches in Switzerland and by tremendous efforts on the part of the Clerk of Works, Father Paul Bossard.

For the past six years we have been sending out and distributing "Die Stimme" our communal parish magazine which is edited regularly by the two ministers. And on 6th November the Bazaar at the Central Hall, Westminster, will be held for the second time on an ecumenical basis bringing together Swiss Protestants and Catholics with their families and friends for a communal effort to raise funds for the two Churches.



Pastor Uli Stefan, who is soon to bid us farewell, has written this article for the Swiss Observer.



and his wife Ursula, whose work in the Colony also calls for a huge "thank you" from us all.

These are just a few milestones on the road we have been led in the past years. Thankfully we look back, but also forward. A new minister has arrived to take over from me on behalf of the German-speaking community of the Swiss Protestant Church, and that with new effort and ideas. Both myself and Father Bossard are confident that the work will continue under him in a true ecumenical spirit.

Now my wife and I are going to leave this country, as we hope, on a not too foggy day in late September. We take the opportunity to give our thanks for all the help, understanding, constructive criticism, prayers and forgiveness which we have received from so many during all these years. God bless you!

Uli and Ursula Stefan