

Protestants Worship With Catholics in Vienna Cathedral

Historic meeting mixed Baptists and Catholics with electric guitars and Vineyard choruses

By: Tomas Dixon in Vienna

Abold step toward renewal in a maverick Catholic congregation in Vienna, Austria, could be evidence of a new move to spread reconciliation through Catholic Europe.

For centuries Vienna was the capital of political Catholicism, a propellant of the Counter-Reformation and a bastion of opposition to charismatics and evangelicals. Even today, most Austrians and many Catholics believe charismatic or evangelical churches are "sects" to be distrusted and discredited.

Catholic Archbishop Christoph Schonborn of Vienna is out to change that attitude. Facing strong internal opposition, Schonborn recently invited charismatic and evangelical churches to meet together with Catholic renewal groups at Catholic City Cathedral of St. Stephen's in Vienna.

On Jan. 18, for the first time ever, a Baptist pastor preached in St. Stephen's. Worship_ electric guitars, saxophone, drums and all_ was led by a musician from a Vineyard church.

"Yes," Schonborn confirmed to Charisma minutes after the service, "this was an historic night. I am overwhelmed."

More than 2,000 mostly young Christians showed up in the cathedral, a good-sized number for an Austrian "surprise party." Schonborn had started organizing the event only six weeks prior.

The historic meeting's atmosphere was relaxed. Participants from all denominations were overtly happy_ even thrilled, one organizer said. The service contained "electrical" free church worship, contemplative Catholic hymns, personal testimonies, Scripture readings, an evangelical sermon, worship dance, a Catholic procession carrying the cross, a light ceremony and more.

The meeting succeeded because it was a demonstration of true unity_ not just a display of other churches visiting St. Stephen's and accepting its style, but an example of how Christians from different backgrounds can celebrate together, organizers said.

Bruce Clewett, national director of Youth With a Mission in Austria, said there were two remarkable things about this service: "Firstly, that the archbishop didn't invite evangelical and independent charismatic church leaders just to come as guests, but rather to help run the program. Secondly, that the Protestants were so eager to come!"

Unity in many past charismatic events has meant Catholics joining in on Protestant-initiated events, Clewett said. This time, by coming to the cathedral, "Protestants actually joined the Catholics on

their turf!"

Clewett believes God is slowly opening the door to what he refers to as "open-eyed unity."

The theme of the Vienna meeting was the Cross, where the unity is based "not just on an experience or on the drawing power of some famous Christian personality," Clewett said.

Johannes Fichtenbauer, chief organizer of the meeting, is Schonborn's personal delegate to the charismatic and evangelical churches in Austria.

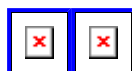
Fichtenbauer emphasized the reconciliatory intention: "Historically, Vienna has been a place of division and suffering, especially to Protestants during the Counter-Reformation. This cannot be mended except through reconciliation," he said.

Church unity, Fichtenbauer added, cannot be achieved by political means. "It takes worshipping together and taking in the Word together, allowing the Holy Spirit to add one living stone to the other.

"Let's say between Baptists and Catholics, there is a detectable togetherness," Fichtenbauer said.

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