



Building bridges with people in Romania

Five members of the European Liaison Group of Churches Together in the Borough of Croydon recently spent four days at an International Ecumenical Conference in Romania at the invitation of Studium Academicum, an ecumenical training institution set up by a group of pastors of the Reformed Church around Oradea. They were led by Revd Alan Middleton, Croydon Archdeaconry Ecumenical Officer and Chair of the Liaison Group, and included Revd John Greig, his predecessor, and Revd Anna Heffernan, the group's secretary.

Delegates also attended from the Netherlands, Germany, the Czech Republic and Hungary, as well as from the host churches in Romania. The conference explored the predicament of the Hungarians who found themselves living in western Romania, following the border changes after the First World War.

They have seen their cultural and religious heritage threatened on the one hand by the Romanian Orthodox Church, and on the other by an influx of people of Romanian origin who have reduced the Hungarian speakers to a minority. The delegates learned much of the discrimination experienced by those who found themselves strangers in their own country, their language downgraded, and the Catholic and Reformed Churches unable to recover their property confiscated during the Communist period.

Local families hospitably entertained the visitors in their homes giving a welcome insight into their way of life (something of a culture shock for westerners used to non-stop hot water and indoor flushing toilets!). The hosts organised visits to churches, social projects and historic sights, as well as to a fine exhibition of folk dancing by high school students. The local congregations laid on mountains of good food.

Our visiting clergy were honoured to be invited to participate in the Sunday services and Anna Heffernan's simple but powerful sermon, translated into Hungarian by the local pastor, moved some of the congregation to tears. All the services ended with the fervent singing of Psalm 90, which the Hungarians adopted as their defiant National Anthem when the original one was banned during the Communist era.

The delegates met the Mayor of Oradea and local politicians and were assured that relations between Romanians and Hungarians in the area were harmonious. The fact that the President of Hungary was on a state visit to the city at the time seemed to be a sign of hope for the future.

All the national groups attending the conference found the whole experience enormously rewarding, and the pressure felt by the local minority people on their traditions and culture very moving. They hoped that they had been able to help in some small way by showing their hosts that they appreciated their plight. The conference enabled those attending to renew old friendships and to form new ones across countries and across denominations. The new boon of the internet will enable such relationships to flourish. Many invitations were issued for visits to Croydon and London before the next conference which will be held in the Czech Republic in 2004.

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