

Faith in Europe Study Visit to Brussels, 24-26 February 2009

Report from Brussels: Philip Walters, Helen Hutchison and Andrew Bowden

Thirteen members of Faith in Europe took part. We visited the following institutions.

(A) Institutions Representing Churches and Religious Organisations

CEC Church and Society Commission (CSC)

We were briefed by:

- Matthew Ross (MR), a Church of Scotland minister seconded by four UK churches as Executive Secretary to the CSC
- Peter Pavlovic (PP), Study Secretary in the CSC, focusing on European integration, globalisation and the environment
- Elizabeta Kitanovic (EK), an Executive Secretary in the CSC, specialising in human rights and religious freedom
- Rob van Drimmelen (RD), General Secretary of APRODEV

The Church and Society Commission is the result of the merger of CEC's work on church and society issues and the European Ecumenical Commission for Church and Society (EECCS), which was completed in January 1999. Its tasks are: to help the churches study church and society questions from a theological and social ethical perspective, especially those with a European dimension; and to represent the member churches of CEC in their relations with political institutions working in Europe. A good deal of the Commission's work is undertaken by its Working Groups.

The CSC team gave us an overview of their work programme, in the context of the forthcoming 13th CEC Assembly in Lyon in July and of the proposed Article 17C in the Lisbon Treaty, pending ratification, which will for the first time oblige the EU to engage in 'open, transparent and regular dialogue' with faith communities. We had the impression that the work programme was too wide-ranging for the staff available to cover all parts of it equally effectively, and that they would in fact need to concentrate on selected aspects of it at any one time.

The CSC has prepared a 15-page booklet called *European Parliament Elections 4-7 June 2009: Guide for Churches and Christian Organisations in the European Union: Our Christian Vision, Our Concerns, Our Questions*.

APRODEV (Association of World Council of Churches Related Development Organisations in Europe) was founded in 1990 in order to strengthen the cooperation between the European development organisations which work closely together with the WCC. At present, 17 development and humanitarian aid organisations cooperate through APRODEV. They are all firmly rooted in their own societies and their constituencies comprise millions of Christians from the Anglican, Protestant and Orthodox communities. The mandate of APRODEV is: i) to influence decision-making processes in the European Union institutions related to North-South issues in order to promote fairness and justice and the eradication of poverty; ii) to facilitate access to the European Union institutions for APRODEV organisations and the ecumenical family and to share information and experience related to the EU; and iii) to strengthen cooperation and joint work among APRODEV agencies.

APRODEV has produced a list of lobbying points for the forthcoming elections.

RD spoke of APRODEV's focus on development, not only in the south but also within Europe itself. The current economic crisis was ambiguous in its effect, some charities reporting a fall-off in donations, others an increase. He focused on the problem of 'incoherence' in development work: the right hand frequently doesn't know what the left is doing, with resulting waste, inefficiency and duplication.

EK said that the EU has recently set up an Agency for Fundamental Rights to deal with human rights within the EU specifically. The CSC is a member of this.

PP said that CEC had been founded as a bridge-building body between Eastern and Western Europe 50 years ago. He added that CEC's work on European integration was about the continent of Europe, not just the EU. They did not just speak about economic issues but provided a space in which people could consider human/spiritual and ethical issues.

PP explained his own brief. He said that 'integration' is understood by the CSC to refer not only to the EU but to Europe in the wider sense, including Switzerland, Norway, Russia etc. He pointed out that the Russian Orthodox Church is the largest CEC member-church. CEC is one of the few all-European organisations, and is not oriented solely towards the EU. As far as the environment and globalisation are concerned, the CSC aims to stress the ethical and theological dimension, including the need to make care for creation part of the liturgy. The CSC is trying to establish dialogue between the churches in Europe and the churches in Latin America on these issues.

MR predicted that before the next EU budget period begins in 2013 there will be a huge row within the EU over the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). At the moment France receives 50 per cent of the CAP subsidy, which is itself 50 per cent of the total EU budget. There is already protest at this from countries such as Poland, where a higher percentage of the population than in France are engaged in agriculture.

COMECE

We were briefed by:

- Fr Piotr Mazurkiewicz (PM), the new General Secretary of COMECE, appointed in 2008 to succeed Noel Treanor; from the Diocese of Warsaw.

COMECE is the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community. It is made up of bishops delegated by the 24 Catholic Bishops' Conferences of the European Union and it has a permanent secretariat in Brussels. Its objectives are: i) to monitor and analyse the political process of the European Union; ii) to inform and raise awareness within the church of the development of EU policy and legislation; iii) to promote reflection, based on the Catholic Church's social teaching, on the challenges facing a united Europe.

PM said that the original motivation which led to the formation of the European Union, integration, had an ethical value in itself, to do with peace and stability, which the EU has certainly achieved within its borders.

PM said that one of his main roles was to inform the Bishops' Conferences of what is being discussed in Brussels so that they have information to act on if they wish in their local context.

PM said that COMECE participates in discussions with the EU where channels are open, and on issues which concern the Catholic Church – not all issues do. He listed as examples the ethical dimension of politics, human rights, the right to life, family, marriage, education, the financial crisis and climate change. In his view COMECE should not be regarded as one of the many lobby groups in Brussels, since it represents 60 per cent of the population of Europe. Large (inter)national churches should not be placed in the same category as, for example, Scientology.

PM said that COMECE issues statements when appropriate, and is planning one in advance of the European elections. COMECE written texts have to be agreed by plenary meetings of bishops and then Bishops' Conferences prepare their own material for their own country. This recognises the principle of subsidiarity - that there is a need for different approaches dependent on different local economic situations, culture etc. 'Responsibility for a good European Union and "the common good" has to be balanced with local responsibility.'

One of our group asked why the proposed statement for the European elections could not have been produced as a joint statement with the one produced by CEC. PM said that the problem with a collaborative statement would be not what it contained but what it would have to leave out. Issues on which there is no agreement between COMECE and CEC include abortion, experiments on embryos and marriage between same-sex partners. The COMECE statement would contain specific references to all these.

PM spoke openly and thoughtfully about the collaboration between COMECE and CEC. Such collaboration is necessary in the interests of efficiency and effectiveness. In some areas, such as climate change, collaboration is easy. Other areas, however, present certain theological difficulties. On the subject of making Sunday a rest day, for example, COMECE has reached agreement with the Church of England and with the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, but not with CEC. Other issues include, for example, abortion. There is an abortion every 37 seconds in Europe, making it the main cause of death. CEC documents never mention abortion, however. This is because CEC brings together a whole range of majority and minority churches, Protestant and Orthodox, and on subjects on which there is no consensus amongst its members, CEC's official position must be that it can take no position. On such issues you can't say that COMECE and CEC disagree, because there is nothing from the CEC side to disagree with. Meanwhile any statement issued by COMECE will have to be approved by all 24 Bishops' Conferences.

The Jesuit European Office (OCIPE)

We were briefed by:

- Fr Frank Turner (FT), head of OCIPE in Brussels since January 2005. He is a member of the British Province of the Jesuits, ordained in 1981. His doctorate was in the area of faith and justice. He taught political theology in the universities of Manchester and London, and for seven years he was adviser to the bishops of England and Wales on international affairs.
- José Ignacio Garcia (JI), who is working on climate change at OCIPE.

OCIPE seeks to accompany the construction of Europe in serving its personnel in their professional and spiritual discernment, in sustaining critical reflection from the perspective of Christian faith on European values and responsibilities, and in promoting Europe's solidarity internally and with the wider world.

FT explained that OCIPE moved from Strasbourg in 1963, where it maintains an 'antenna', and it now has smaller offices in Budapest and Warsaw. Until 1980, when COMECE was set up, OCIPE had also represented the Bishops' Conferences, but had been happy to shed that responsibility. OCIPE had formerly been an information and documentation centre, also publishing journals, but since the end of the Cold War these were no longer needed, and it was now dealing mainly with advocacy. However, it still produces a monthly journal, *Europe Infos*, in collaboration with COMECE.

FT said that OCIPE is an international organisation rather than one focusing only on the EU or Europe. It still deals with Europe, but has been steadily increasing its involvement in other parts of the world through the Jesuit presence in various countries, in the context of Europe's relations with these other countries.

FT spoke about one of OCIPE's major projects on the international exploitation of natural resources in the Congo. They have a lawyer on the staff looking after this one.

Another big involvement is with Jesuit mobilisation of lower-caste and casteless people in India, who total 280 million. FT pointed out that India is the country with the largest number of Jesuits. Jesuits are also growing in South-East Asia; by contrast their numbers are shrinking in Europe and the USA.

FT also spoke about OCIPE's concern with indigenous people's rights and despoliation of the forests in the Amazon region. This concern had arisen out of OCIPE's involvement with climate change issues within the EU, and was an example of how OCIPE's EU-related work leads to wider involvement with the world at large.

Jl then spoke in more detail about his work at OCIPE on climate change. He wondered whether Christians could appeal to a deeper vision, not just about mitigation but about changing lifestyles. Whilst faith bodies were good with people, he observed that environmentalists tended to be not so good with the personal approach. He felt that there was a need to bring the two together.

FT said that OCIPE works with other religious organisations in Brussels: for example, it has agreed to work with CEC on informing people about the forthcoming European Parliament elections.

FT also observed that the current Commission is more neo-liberal than any of its predecessors.

The Quaker Council for European Affairs (QCEA)

We were briefed by:

- Liz Scurfield (LS), who joined the Quakers in 1995 and has been working at the QCEA in Brussels since 2002. She is a leading author of books on learning Chinese, and a co-founder of the Chinese Department at the University of Westminster.

LS explained that Quakers began working in Brussels soon after the UK joined the EU, and that the QCEA was founded in 1979 to promote Quaker values in the European context and to express a Quaker vision in matters of peace, human rights and economic justice. The house in Brussels is owned by the British Yearly Meeting, but QCEA represents Yearly Meetings in the majority of EU countries.

LS gave a thorough presentation of all the areas in which QCEA is active. We were impressed by her energy and commitment which evidently enabled her, and a small group of colleagues, to give the Quakers a high-profile presence in Brussels.

LS showed how the QCEA concentrates on one main issue at a time. An early project had been to assess the situation in each EU member-state on conscientious objection to military service. The main current project is on the rights of, and conditions for, women prisoners. In choosing a project one of the first things they check is whether anybody else is doing it. If they are, QCEA doesn't take it on, unless it can bring 'added value' to it.

LS drew our attention to the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office which has continuing dialogue with the EU institutions.

Holy Trinity Anglican Church

We were briefed by:

- Canon Robert Innes (RI), Senior Chaplain of Holy Trinity Church, in January 2008 appointed President of the Anglican Central Committee of Belgium, and thus the head of the Anglican Church in Belgium

Holy Trinity Church is a pro-cathedral of the Anglican Diocese in Europe.

RI said that he works closely with Gary Wilton, recently appointed as the Church of England's first official representative to the EU. Gary Wilton's brief is to deal specifically with climate change.

RI explained that in Belgium there is separation of church and state, so no influence by the state in church appointments, but the state pays the salaries of clergy of the eight registered faiths (which

include Buddhists and Humanists) and the local authorities meet any shortfall in their budgets. The situation is thus almost the exact reverse of the situation in the UK. In return the registered faiths are expected to work for the general good of society in cooperation with the secular authorities.

RI said that the congregation of his church embraces a very wide social spectrum, from illegal immigrants to MEPs.

(B) The European Institutions

The European Parliament

We were briefed by:

- Judith Crawford (JC), Parliamentary Assistant in the office of John Purvis MEP (Conservative)
- Nima Azarmgin (NA), Assistant to Erna Hennicot-Schoepges MEP (Christian Social People's Party)
- Andrew Duff MEP (AD) (Liberal Democrat)

JC said that John Purvis is involved with the European Prayer Breakfast which takes place every December and involves MEPs and other leading figures. Last year about 300 took part in it. There is also a weekly prayer breakfast in the Parliament which is an opportunity for MEPs to build up a relationship of trust. There is no chaplain for the Parliament, but there is an interfaith meditation room. In Strasbourg there is a prayer breakfast once a month.

JC said that the widening of the EU in 2004, with the arrival of MEPs from Poland and other Central European countries, made quite a difference to the religious atmosphere in the Parliament.

One of our group asked about the all-party Working Group on the Separation of Religion and Politics (WGSRP). JC said that this was set up about four years ago by half a dozen MEPs. Its original stated aim was to study the interplay between religion and politics but it soon became clear that its aim was to separate the two.

JC said that there is at present no formal mechanism in the Parliament for conversation between MEPs and representatives of faith organisations. There is a mechanism for such meetings in the European Commission through the Bureau of European Policy Advisers and this will be formally recognised in Article 17C of the Lisbon Treaty. It is unclear whether a similar arrangement will be introduced to facilitate consultation between MEPs and faith communities.

JC said that there are only half a dozen Muslim MEPs but that she thought the majority of MEPs would be in favour of Turkey joining the EU.

NA, who was born in Teheran, has been Assistant to Erna Hennicot-Schoepges MEP since 2006. In November 2008 Erna Hennicot-Schoepges (Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) and European Democrats (EPP-ED), Luxembourg) organised a hearing 'Women and Spirituality: Women's Rights, Human Rights, Religious Rights: A Sacred Triangle?' in the European Parliament. The role of women in Buddhism, Protestant women in the 21st century and women's role in the Orthodox Church today were some of the issues on the agenda. The EPP-ED has long experience in the domain of interreligious dialogue, respecting European values and the importance of religious pluralism.

NA said that in 2008 a series of hearings was organised in the Parliament with representatives of civil society as part of the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue programme. Erna Hennicot-Schoepges had pressed for the inclusion of religious bodies, but many other MEPs had been opposed to this. She had nevertheless organised some meetings on religious themes herself. NA said that in his view 'intercultural dialogue' usually consists of conversation between Muslims and non-Muslims.

One of our group asked whether there was a prevalent suspicion in EU institutions that religion is intrinsically opposed to concepts such as democracy and human rights. NA said that in his view this was increasingly the case, but that this kind of suspicion was mainly directed towards Islam, and had its origin in reaction specifically to the growth of Islamic fundamentalism.

NA said that the hope had been that the Year of Intercultural Dialogue would extend beyond one year, but there had been a lack of resources. Any continuation would depend on initiatives from civil society organisations. He believed that the EU did not see its role as an educational one and he thought this view might have to be reconsidered, particularly if Turkey joined the EU. It would be a positive step, showing that Europe can be fully integrated with a Muslim country, but the EU would need to undertake an educational campaign so that the EU values of democracy, freedom of speech and justice would be fully understood by people in that country.

AD said that he had criticised his own church, the Church of England, for its concentration on the nation and the Commonwealth. In his view it should have played a more active part in developing the UK's role in Europe.

AD said that the accession of Orthodox countries to the EU had shown again how strong the force of national religion can be.

AD said that there are some specific issues, such as genetic experimentation, which always provoke heated discussion in the Parliament and demonstrate the tension between secularism and religion. One of our group asked why the EU constituencies are so big as to make it impossible for MEPs to get to know their electorate. AD said that since the EU uses proportional representation the range of MEPs from any one constituency has to reflect the proportion of votes cast for each party. If the constituencies were any smaller there would be too few MEPs in each to do so fairly.

A question about what structures are available for constituents to relate to their MEPs elicited the response that surgeries in the UK MP style are not so successful so MEPs tend to use school or factory visits to raise public awareness. They also tend to be reactive rather than proactive.

AD also said that he welcomed the engagement in issues and dialogue by churches and said that they should work more directly with the EU through interfaith work. He underlined the importance of the opportunity for dialogue which will take place under the new constitution (Article 17C in the Lisbon Treaty). He described the EU as 'a value-driven principled system of government' whose 'primary function is to legislate and to scrutinise and interrogate the Council (sic)'. It is therefore not a similar function to that of a UK MP. The mandate is federal rather than national.

The European Commission

We were briefed by:

- Peter Hill (PH), a member of the Cabinet of Catherine Ashton, the EU Trade Commissioner and the one Commissioner from the UK.

The European Commission is the executive branch of the European Union. It is responsible for proposing legislation, implementing decisions, upholding the Union's treaties and the general day-to-day running of the Union. It operates in the method of cabinet government, with 27 Commissioners. There is one Commissioner per member state, though Commissioners are bound to represent the interests of the EU as a whole rather than their home state. One of the 27 is the Commission President, appointed by the European Council with the approval of the European Parliament for a five-year term. The current President is José Manuel Barroso, who took office in late 2004. The Commissioners are backed up by an administrative body of about 25,000 European civil servants who are in departments called Directorates-General.

PH explained that in his experience the European Commission is much more 'porous' than British government departments, meaning that it is easier to arrange meetings and have informal conversations. Each Commissioner has a particular area, but all the Commissioners take consensus decisions together on the whole range of issues. The Commission is genuinely seeking the best for the long-term interests of Europe as a whole, and this isn't the same thing as simply finding the lowest common denominator.

PH said that the Trade Commission (in which he works) has contact with some faith-based groups, principally CAFOD and Christian Aid, but that the Commissioners with the most contact with religious groups would be those dealing with Communication and with Civil Society.

PH described a love-hate relationship between the Parliament and the Commission, and also pointed to the Council of Ministers as the place where real power resides. He described the legislative process as tripartite, involving input in various ways and at various times from the Commission, the Parliament and the Council.

In responding to a question on climate change, PH said that the issues are intensely political - citing for example the effect on the Polish coal industry. Long-term interests are taken into account and decisions consider what is the 'right thing to do' in any given set of circumstances for governments, civil society, business or individuals.

One of our group asked whether the Commission was considering honing its rapid response mechanism to provide more effective rebuttal of mendacious and misleading information about the EU in certain parts of the British media. PH said the Commission was reluctant to do so, because it didn't want to appear to be interfering in the internal affairs of a member-state. Its aim would be to encourage the government of the member-state in question to organise its own rapid rebuttal mechanisms: the British government is after all a paid-up member of the EU and it should be in its own interests to do this. However, he also said that rebuttal was a priority for Commissioner Wallström's cabinet and they were looking at how to get across a more accurate vision of Europe.

One of our group asked how a faith-based organisation in the UK should go about mounting a rebuttal of a particular calumny. PH said it should ring up the press office of the Commission in the UK and ask to be sent its line on this particular issue. The press office is always keen to help in this kind of situation.

PH noted that a Commission has a life-cycle of five years, and this means that it tends to come up with all its new ideas and proposals in the first three years, and then spends the next two seeing them through the legislative process. It is very rare for a Commission to come up with new ideas in its last 18 months (which is where the current Commission is).

Evaluation of the Brussels Visit

We agree that the group had been of an ideal size for good discussion with our interlocutors.

We discussed monitoring the development of the 'open, transparent and regular dialogue' with faith-based organisations which would be formalised in the Lisbon Treaty: *inter alia* would there be minutes of such dialogue meetings?

We discussed monitoring the progress of such dialogue, particularly as it might develop with secularist and humanist organisations.

We noted that for the younger generation in the UK, single issues affecting the world, like climate change, are likely to be a way of stimulating awareness of the importance of the European connection.

We discussed whether Faith in Europe might write to all Anglican bishops describing the findings of the Brussels visit and encouraging them to revive or reinvigorate the roles of their respective diocesan Europe officers.

Conclusions by Andrew Bowden (added to his own version of the above report for the Churches Rural Group)

Conclusions on our Visits to Church Organisations

Our visit to these groups was very informative. Three of them concentrate on a limited agenda that they feel they can deal with effectively.

CEC tries to cover all social and justice and EU structure issues that affect the churches and have relevance to Christian concerns. Climate change, ecology, trade within and outside the EU, immigration, poverty issues, conditions of work etc. – everything is reported on in their very informative and up-to-date emails. But it is extremely difficult for the small hard-pressed staff to be expert in every field.

One of the issues that was not mentioned in the introduction they gave to us was that of agriculture and rural development within the EU. I felt that it was currently marginal to their core concerns. Matthew Ross has done a great job keeping the rural churches informed of what is going on at the EU, and – via an OIKOS report on the future of agriculture – keeping the flag flying for rural issues. But he will soon be leaving, and may well not be replaced.

Our Christian rural concerns need an enthusiastic lobby support group networking on our behalf in Brussels, and our rural churches need to be kept in touch with Commission proposals as they affect rural society. EU legislation has had an enormous impact on daily life in our farms and villages in the past, and it will continue to do so. We therefore need first class representation in Brussels.

But who will do this in the future?

Conclusions on our visits to the European Institutions

The importance of the Brussels institutions. We were told that 50 per cent of national legislation is affected by decisions taken by the Commission. This is true for church life as for economic life (e.g. regulations about access to public buildings.) We cannot ignore the EU.

The Lisbon Treaty. It does not mention God in the preamble, and it maintains a clear division between sacred and secular. However, if passed, Article 17C will oblige the EU to engage in 'an open, transparent and regular dialogue' with faith communities. Consultation with the churches will therefore be on the statute book. But it has to be recognised that the influence of the churches will depend on the quality of their comment on legislation.

Christian organisations in Brussels. This underlines the importance of our having high quality representation among the Christian groups who are networking within the EU. They need our support. They also need careful oversight to ensure that the officers are servicing our agenda and not just pursuing their own personal interests.

The European elections – followed by the creation of a new Commission. These take place in early June this year, and there is an opportunity for each church/congregation to alert Christians about voting, and about how to engage in 'dialogue' with prospective MEP's. (Possible use of the CEC booklet?)

Philip Walters is the Secretary of Faith in Europe.

Helen Hutchison is Chair of the Europe Group in St Albans Diocese. She is a writer and campaigner with a background in press and public relations work and formerly Senior Press Officer at the Equal Opportunities Commission. She has been involved with the Diocesan Board of Social Responsibility for many years, worked as a parish social responsibility officer for a St Albans church and collaborated with the local MP on campaigns on housing and homelessness, school safety issues and events such as Jubilee 2000.

Andrew Bowden is the author of *Ministry in the Countryside* and *Dynamic Local Ministry* and Chair of the Churches Rural Group, a Co-ordinating Group of Churches Together in England which draws together official representatives of all the churches and church agencies working in rural England.

Report from Brussels: Jim Knights

Emerging from the Schuman metro station in Brussels, the visitor is dwarfed by the European Commission building with its arc of 27 flag poles, one for each member state of the European Union. Thirteen of us members of Faith in Europe had travelled by Eurostar to find out how the church can relate positively to various institutions of the EU.

Critics of the EU often refer to 'faceless bureaucrats' who produce endless laws and regulations that many would rather be without. We met people with faces and enthusiasm and a genuine desire to work for the common good among diverse European nations. One person, Peter, is employed by the British Foreign Office and now supports the UK Trade Commissioner at the EU. He explained that lawmaking has a threefold input from the Council of Ministers, the Commission and the European Parliament. The influential ministers sometimes 'fight like cats and dogs' to promote their interests, but that is greatly preferable to outright war which devastated Europe in the twentieth century. When it comes to Christian influence, the Trade Commission has contacts with CAFOD and Christian Aid. Faith groups also have access to the Communication and Civil Society activities of the EU.

We learnt that a Scottish MEP attends the European Prayer Breakfast along with about 300 others. The weekly prayer breakfast at the Parliament also brings MEPs together. Holy Trinity Anglican Church in Brussels attracts large congregations which include MEPs and their support staff. Anglican priest Gary Wilton represents the Church of England at the EU with special concern for climate change.

Our group visited the offices of the Quakers and the Catholic Jesuits. The Quakers have influenced EU decisions on matters such as anti-discrimination, conscientious objection and peace building. They work with other faith groups as they draw alongside MEPs and members of the Council of Europe. The Jesuits seek to assist EU decision-makers by advocating international solidarity and social justice as well as facilitating spiritual discernment.

The Conference of European Churches allowed our group to use their office as a venue for talks and for assessment of our two-day visit. My main impression is of a giant political and social institution that will not achieve its aims without a spiritual dimension. Peace, reconciliation and justice are essential elements of the Christian gospel. They are also values accepted by people of other faiths and humanists who, with the churches, will have closer access to the EU if the Lisbon Treaty is ratified.

Our group enjoyed being together, sharing common concerns, meeting a stimulating variety of people, sampling Moroccan and Belgian cuisine. We have hope for Europe and give thanks for faith in Europe.

Jim Knights is a retired parish priest, living in Malvern, with special interest in relations with German Christians.

Report from Brussels: Richard Seebohm

Thirteen Faith in Europe members, several of us retired clerics, spent 24 to 26 February on a study visit to Brussels. Our host was **Matthew Ross** of the Church and Society Commission (CSC) of the Conference of European Churches (CEC). Based in Geneva, CEC encompasses the Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox churches. CSC works closely with APRODEV, a club of 17 Protestant development aid NGOs, including Christian Aid of the UK. It has links to a plethora of other NGOs, including those of Catholic affiliation and in particular some that are fully ecumenical such as Eurodiaconia, which deals with poverty and social exclusion within Europe. CEC also has an outpost in Strasbourg relating to the Council of Europe.

As well as Matthew (Church of Scotland, soon to leave), we heard from **Elizabeta Kitanovic**, who is Serbian Orthodox and has a work programme based on human rights (including the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, which is a Vienna-based successor to the European Monitoring Centre for Racism and Xenophobia). She also covers ethical investment by churches and employment law. She is involved in dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Church. (I am not sure whether she is involved in the current withdrawal of Russian cooperation with CEC over recognition of the Russian Church in Estonia, where the Estonian Orthodox claim predominance.)

Peter Pavlovic is Slovakian. European integration is central to CSC's work, not just meaning the EU. As study secretary, he runs working groups on the environment and globalisation. The churches are only slowly recognising global warming as a faith matter and thinking about their own lifestyles and property management. There is a movement to mark the period 1 September to 1 October each year as 'Creation Time'.

On globalisation, the World Council of Churches is an important player, with its Latin American links. Third world campaigners are now looking to Marxist solutions, to the dismay of real former communists.

We asked Peter about Russia. Russia does not fall within the 'EU Neighbourhood Policy' which covers territories having various agreements with the EU. Instead, Russia has to be a 'Strategic Partner'. However, the Russian Orthodox Church (despite the present rift) is CEC's biggest member, and allows us to see Russia, not only in Orthodox terms, as European.

In discussion with Matthew we talked about the forthcoming parliamentary elections. CSC has produced a pamphlet covering its main concerns, but we noted that younger voters were more likely to be motivated by single issues rather than mainstream politics.

One of us asked about rural affairs. Matthew commented that there was more to it than agriculture. Because the new member states were being fitted in, reform of the CAP was having to wait until the 2013 budget review. The present system was unsustainable, given that 50 per cent of the EU budget went on the CAP and 50 per cent of that went to France. The Poles would be losers too. We gathered that in Romania the Roma were taking over deserted Saxon villages, and were having to be taught how to farm (shades of Zimbabwe!).

Rob van Drimmelen is director of APRODEV. With 8 staff, he has to keep abreast of trade, debt, climate, agriculture, fishery, and in particular, tax justice so that poor countries can collect revenue from local business activity rather than acting as tax havens. Different territories need different lobbying techniques. The distinction between western (northern?) and developing countries is now less relevant. Some donors question the balance between public campaigning, lobbying and field work. Lobbyists have to get under the skin of decision makers, even if they must conceal their true thoughts. APRODEV collaborates happily with Catholic and secular agencies. Overall, its guiding principles are justice and equity. It has to keep a hold on the moral aspects of its work as upheld by the churches that lie behind its members. A typical development anecdote is the life cycle of a European chicken carcass. First of all the breast and legs are taken for supermarket packs. Then the remaining meat is extracted for soups and burgers. The remnants are frozen and exported to Cameroun. After unloading,

the produce is left on the dockside in the sun. No wonder that salmonella infects the hungry purchasers.

Our next port of call was COMECE, the secretariat of the EU Catholic bishops. Separately, however, CCEE is the pastoral wing of the Catholic bishops in Europe. It was they who joined with CEC in the (now defunct) Islam in Europe Committee. The Committee's advice on meeting Buddhists 'to whom the traditions of the Church are often unknown' was that dialogue should be under supervision of the bishop and entrusted to those who are properly trained. (So much for congregationalism.)

We met Fr **Piotr Mazurkiewicz**, successor to Noël Treanor (who is now Bishop of Down and Connor). COMECE cooperates with CEC where it can, where this is efficient. Climate change is easy. CEC statements tend to end in questions, reflecting the difficulty of getting firm answers from all of its churches. Only some CEC members share the Catholic concern to keep the Sabbath concept in the Working Time Directive. The CEC advice on the EP elections is fine as far as it goes, but the Catholics have their own line on family matters and protection of life. COMECE may still make its own statement, but it is mainly a matter for national bishops. But participation is a must. We are responsible for failure to act.

Given the plethora of Brussels lobby groups, COMECE tries to focus on the common good rather than the narrow interests of the Catholic Church. Article 17 of the draft treaty was welcome, recognising the specific contribution of the churches. The Sibiu Assembly in 2007 had a 'western agenda', and the Vatican held back from pro-life issues. This did not apply to the Russians! The Russian Orthodox Church is still dependent on its national government. But a concern about excessive nationalism is perhaps a Protestant problem(?). It was the Reformation that brought the state into church matters(?). But people expect the governments they elect to be nationalistic.

Next day at the European Parliament we were first received by **Judith Crawford**, assistant to John Purvis, one of the EPP-ED (Tory) MEPs for the single Scottish constituency. The Parliament has a meditation room but no chapel. (But the newly restored ecumenical Chapel of the Resurrection is just over the road from the Parliament; some of our group went to an Ash Wednesday Mass and were impressed by the youthfulness and spirituality they found there.) There are five Muslim MEPs. All one can say about the admission of Turkey to the EU is that it is controversial. Turkey has yet to meet the justice criteria. The combat of corruption is slackening in Romania and Bulgaria, though they are now members.

Issues for the EP elections include the Lisbon Treaty, the world economic crisis, globalisation, climate, energy, and the more domestic matter of cross-border health service access. Judith did not mention terrorism or the emerging surveillance society. The possible defection of the British conservatives from the EPP is still in the balance. You need MEPs from five member states to form a new group, and so far only the Czechs are on board. Of the 12 less-than-useful UKIP MEPs, three have already left to become independents.

Next, **Nima Azarmgin** joined us. He is assistant to Erna Hennicot-Schoepges, a Luxembourg EPP-ED MEP who is credited with a hearing on 'Women and Spirituality'. He himself is an Azeri, from a persecuted minority in Iran. Mrs Hennicot (as he called her) was a sponsor of the EU's Year of Intercultural Dialogue in 2008, a project we heard mentioned several times but without yet discerning its outcome. Mrs H had wanted religion to feature, but the Commission saw only culture, education and inclusivity, with belief mentioned rather than religion as such. According to Nima, half the population of the Brussels commune will be Muslim within ten years. New generations of immigrant families to the EU do not know much about where they come from but just feel discriminated against – closed societies inside an open society. It isn't just immigrants. A friend of his in Luxembourg had moved to a different village at a distance of some ten miles. Her dog had been killed, with the explanation that she didn't belong there.

If Turkey were to join the EU, the urban community in Turkey could handle it, but up country there was more of a problem. Education would be the key, but that was outside EU competence.

Andrew Duff now came in. He is an ALDE (Lib-Dem) MEP for the East of England. He specialises in constitutional matters. The UK could have made better sense of the draft treaty were it not for the unfortunate and painful British focus on nationhood and her lackadaisical Anglicanism. At the same time, legacies need to be transcended. Orthodox Church mindsets in the newer member states are making nationalism more problematical. At the same time, the secularist legacy in Turkish politics presents problems of its own – Andrew chairs the joint working party of the European and Turkish parliaments.

He had no direct answer to a question about the social capital of rural churches in the UK and in some of the newer member states. The CAP has a social side, and churches can find an entry point for discussion about this and about overseas aid in the European Parliament. In challenging the status quo we should not see the EU as a cash cow but as collectively principle-driven, with protection of the citizen in mind. If bureaucracy is the problem it is more at the national than the EU level. As a federalist, he championed subsidiarity: if a member state got it wrong, it was not for the EU to pick up the pieces. All the same, MEPs are legislators, with more power than MPs in the UK. They have to navigate cross-border issues with serious civil law implications (such as marriage and divorce). But the resources available to them are not at all comparable to those of US representatives and senators. The European Parliament gets press coverage only in the event of a scandal.

Article 17 of the draft treaty needs to give good coverage to the diversity of faiths; anything properly focused should be heard. But the secularists do not have a coherent voice.

The EP constituencies in the UK are large, but if they were smaller they would each offer too few seats for proportional representation to work properly. This is a Lib-Dem imperative, which the British, uniquely, fail to understand. The MEPs come from some 150 national political parties, and the ALDE has to be a broad church. Its Italian members are a mixture of Christian democrats and radicals, both of whom want the Vatican kept out of politics.

At the Anglican Holy Trinity Pro-Cathedral (of the diocese of Gibraltar) we had hoped to see Gary Wilton, newly appointed Church of England representative in Brussels to the EU, but he was away. We were well welcomed by **Canon Robert Innes**, the Senior Chaplain and head of the Anglican Church in Belgium. The Roman Catholic clergy in Belgium do not wear clerical dress or collars, so neither does he.

This unobtrusively sited church, like its sister churches in Belgium, has an extraordinary status. The functioning religious bodies, Roman Catholic, Protestant and Jewish, when Belgium gained independence in 1831, became constitutionally arms of the state. Their salaries are paid and their properties maintained at public expense. This was in part compensation for the annexation of church property to the state by Napoleon. King Leopold I, after his niece Victoria had come to the British throne, and recognising the part Britain had played in freeing his (adopted) country, conferred these privileges also on the Anglican Church. Eight 'recognised' religious bodies including Buddhists and Muslims, and a humanist (or organised laity) counterpart organisation, are now within the system. A budget has to be agreed and audited, but the state has no jurisdiction over appointments. As for conduct, the budgets have to be 'supportive of the local social order'. There is a rule that all their documents have to be translated into both official languages (so that none are in Arabic only!). Subversion is thus less of an issue than elsewhere, but transparency is important. Two imams are in prison for fraud.

Holy Trinity has four services each Sunday, an early Communion, a traditional parish Communion for some 250, not all British expatriates, and an afternoon African service, with French translation for the Rwandans and Congolese. Finally, an evensong. About half the parishioners are African, many of them probably illegals (having no identity as the Belgians put it). The church does what it can for the widespread poverty it sees, with a low profile, but it cannot offer accommodation to anyone.

Liz Scurfield talked to us at QCEA. Her highlights from the past were women in prison, conscientious objection to military service, and EPLO (the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office), which has at last firmed up contacts with the Council secretariat as well as the Commission. Otherwise, she featured the QCEA and Quaker background, and the present work programme to be seen on the QCEA website, with sustainable energy security at the top of the list. QCEA has to be selective, so that the arms trade, child soldiers and nuclear issues are more for other NGOs or the Geneva and New York Quaker UN offices. It is worth mentioning that QCEA's recent reports on Conflict Prevention in the ACP programme (the EU's most prominent development aid package), and on EU Enlargement and the Western Balkans, are of a depth and professionalism that few NGOs are capable of matching.

At the European Commission we were received by **Peter Hill**. He is in the 'Cabinet' of Baroness Catherine Ashton, successor to Peter Mandelson with the trade portfolio. He had been with Mandelson for two years before he left. The Cabinet has 7 diplomatic staff plus support. Because the Commissioners act collegially, the staff have to be able to brief on every single policy issue. National allegiances and political parties have to be left on one side, but the work is clearly political. This avoids the 'race to the bottom', seeking what everyone can sign up to, but coalitions of member states are inevitable. Commissioners are unelected, which allows them a longer-term perspective. The absence of party pressures, and even less press scrutiny than is given to the Parliament, means that officials are fairly free to engage in dialogue if they wish.

We said that we were pained by untruthful anti-EU reporting, given that a Christian orientation led us to be pro-EU. We did not feel that it was well rebutted. Peter said that Margot Wallström, who was the Commissioner responsible for communications, saw this as a priority. The Commission offices in member states are best placed to react. Peter Mandelson had always taken the line that the Commission should keep out of domestic politics and that it was a duty for national governments. He had, however, reacted hard and fast to the No campaign falsehoods that wrecked the Irish referendum (abortion on demand, EU army), and he had confronted the Irish farmers very effectively. Our own role can be to get data and to mobilise the London EU offices.

As for the economic crisis, it was the main topic for the current and future weekly Commission meetings. Where EU money was product, payments are to be brought forward where possible. On Lady Ashton's side, the concern is to stop any trade flows that still exist from being closed down.

Peter could not respond very positively to our question about dialogue with the 'social partners'. The present Commissioners would not have chosen to get tangled up with the Working Time Directive. For example, the British Labour MEPs probably have a swing vote in the Parliament but are at odds with their home government. Issues include job retention versus retraining, and north versus south (in the UK?).

Fr Frank Turner is Director of OCIPE. The 'Office Catholique d'Information des Problèmes de l'Europe' was founded in 1959 as a Jesuit venture by the Bishop of Strasbourg. It began mainly as a source of information, in the absence until 1980, for example, of COMECE. (Its briefings helped me when I worked at QCEA.) The internet has of course been important. But OCIPE's role now is more research and advocacy. Its recent priorities of EU enlargement and constitutional matters have given way to social justice in Africa (including the Congo), Latin America and South Asia. There, the Dalits and others outside the caste system, including Christians, are increasingly exposed to violence. Where a authoritarian administration will only listen if popular feeling is demonstrated on the streets, the Jesuits are ready to mobilise this (Quakers tend to fight shy of going further than demonstrating in person). Frank's colleague **José Ignacio Garcia** is working on climate change and spoke of an internet-based campaigning NGO called Avaaz.

It is a pity that Western Europeans take peace on the ground for granted and don't see what a gift in this respect the EU represents. It should also be healing the wounds of the Reformation. Events in the Balkans show that the risk remains.

OCIPE has offices in Warsaw and Budapest, and also a link to Strasbourg. Frank still sees the Council of Europe as an important player. The ability of the Jesuit presence to use links with other bodies (not

necessarily Catholic) is part of OCIPE's resource. Frank, for example, is on the board of CAFOD. Sadly, Jesuit vocations are now rare, particularly in comparison with more contemplative orders.

Richard Seebohm was formerly Representative in Brussels of the Quaker Council for European Affairs, and is a member of the Quaker Committee on Christian and Interfaith Relations.

ITINERARY

Tuesday 24 February

1403

Arrive Brussels; Check in at Ibis hotel:

1515-1645 **CEC Church and Society Commission**
Matthew Ross
Peter Pavlovic
Elizabeta Kitanovic
Rob van Drimmelen, General Secretary of APRODEV

1730-1830 **COMECE**
Prof. Fr Piotr Mazurkiewicz

February 25 Wednesday

0900-1130 **European Parliament**

0900-1000: Judith Crawford ; Nima Azarmgin

1000-1030: Andrew Duff MEP

1030-1130: Sit in on discussions of a Parliamentary Committee

1200 Optional visit to the Anglican Holy Trinity Church, and meeting there with Canon Dr Robert Innes

1315 Optional Catholic Mass for Ash Wednesday (in French), Chapel of the Resurrection,

1430-1530 **Quaker Council for European Affairs**
Liz Scurfield

1600-1700 **European Commission**
Peter Hill

Thursday 26 February

0900-1000 **Jesuit European Office (OC�PE)**
Fr Frank Turner
José Ignacio Garcia

1030-1200 **CEC Church and Society Commission**
Debriefing and evaluation

1459 Depart Brussels on Eurostar