

Report on the 13th Assembly of the Conference of European Churches, Lyon, 15-21 July 2009

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The assembly celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Conference of European Churches (CEC). There were a lot of people there! From the British Isles, the Bishops of London, Guildford and Dublin among others. The Orthodox Churches were very fully represented, with the exception of Russian Orthodox who have (temporarily we hope) withdrawn. A large Nordic-Baltic group, Germany, Netherlands, Switzerland, Italy and everywhere else too. And a lot of hangers-on like us! English, German and French languages were all used, and there was simultaneous translation via headphones available.

Besides the key-note addresses there were 'hearings' – smaller groups addressed by an expert on a special theme, there was group work, and there were sessions on CEC business matters. There was an 'Agora' consisting of ten or more stalls set up by interested groups. Orthodox groups from Cyprus, Albania, Greece and Czech Republic were very prominent.

The Background to the Assembly

50 years ago CEC was formed, largely as a means for the Western European Churches to keep in touch with Christians behind the Iron Curtain. Not only did it fulfil the hopes of its founders, but it has shown over the years that the Churches CAN speak with a common voice about major issues. However, over 50 years the goalposts have obviously moved. The Iron Curtain has lifted, and Europe is Europe in a way that few in 1946 would ever have dreamed possible. So it was natural that everyone planning the Assembly should believe that the time had come to stand back and take a hard look at what CEC is, what it does, and how it does it. There had been lots of excellent preparatory work for the Assembly and it was carefully planned as a celebration of 50 years' achievement, and as a review of the CEC Vision Statement. But in the event the business agenda took over from the conference theme.

The Assembly Flexes its Muscles

Friday morning began with a profound theological exposition of the conference theme 'Called to one Hope in Christ' by Bishop Wolfgang Huber of the German Lutheran Church. But the business meeting that followed erupted into a day-long debate about the necessity of changing CEC and how to do it.

Delegates from the smaller churches felt they had no say on the CEC council. Many felt that the council had failed to sort problems over the last five years. Clearly there were major financial problems that wouldn't go away. A number of delegates felt that the officers just did their own thing without reference to an overarching strategy, and that there was little cooperation between the Commissions. Above all there was not any longer agreement about what CEC was for – let alone what should be the priorities for officer work. And of course a number of personality conflicts surfaced, and there was open friction between denominational agendas.

The Proposal for an Independent Review

All of this came to a head when the German Churches submitted a 6-page root and branch proposal for the Assembly to set up an independent review group – separate from both council and officers – to make recommendations for change to be put to a special Assembly not later than 2012. After a full day of debate, and thanks largely to hard work behind the scenes, there was a compromise proposal that was finally carried by a large majority. But there will be an independent review of CEC that will be brought to another Assembly as soon as possible and it will undoubtedly include a new vision statement, a new legislative framework, and a new statement on officer work priorities for the CEC commissions. Things will change.

What seems clear, even at this stage, is that:

- The number of officers will be cut;
- The officers will focus on fewer 'subjects';
- Their agenda will certainly include migration issues because CEC is on the verge of linking with the Churches' Commission for Migrant in Europe (CCME);
- The officers will probably (though not certainly) be encouraged to work closely with other groups such as the Churches' European Rural Network (CERN) which have their own specialist expertise and agenda. (In such a case CERN would be the eyes and ears of CEC for rural issues on the ground, while CEC would be the eyes and ears for

CERN at the European Institutions).

Other Important Events

Hearings: Laurens Hogebrink of the Netherlands has produced a report on 100 meetings from 1990 and 2008 between the European Commission and the Churches. Fascinating, and very encouraging. Such contacts between the Churches and the Commission have now been written into the Lisbon Treaty. Further, the Churches are no longer lumped together with everyone else under the term 'civil society' but are recognised as being in a category of their own.

A reception by the Mayor of Lyon at the *Hôtel de Ville*, a quite remarkable Louis Napoleon suite of rooms that compares favourably to any Livery Hall in London. I met the head of COMECE who spoke so lucidly to the 'Faith in Europe' delegation to Brussels in February 2009. After we had gone he had apparently asked his Jesuit counterpart what he thought of us. 'They were very nice, and very sensible – but they were very, very English!'