

The Challenges Facing the Conference of European Churches and the World Council of Churches

1. The Challenges Facing the Conference of European Churches (CEC)

Keith Jenkins

At the time of the Briefing Meeting Keith Jenkins was Associate General Secretary of the Conference of European Churches and Director of CEC's Church and Society Commission. He has since retired.

The main challenges currently facing CEC relate to the European Union.

Work is now proceeding in the EU's 'Convention on the Future of Europe'. Its report will contain recommendations for the restructuring of the EU - perhaps a draft constitution or constitutional treaty for the Union.

One reason why restructuring is necessary is the imminent expansion of the EU. Structures originally designed for six countries creak with 15 and will be paralysed with a bigger membership.

Another reason is that the EU has lost its direction and main goal and has done so at a time when there is widespread cynicism, disillusion, disenchantment and fear in the political process. This is a challenge in the area of values. The original ideals of the unification of Europe were peace, reconciliation and putting an end to war in Europe. These have become ever less significant. The big question now is what is the purpose of European integration. CEC's submission to debate on the Convention will ask the question: is the EU simply a market, a free trade area, or is it a community of values?

A third reason for restructuring is that the method of development in the EU has been a hidden, diplomatic method which involves political elites talking to themselves and which does not carry people with them. The politicians aren't necessarily in touch with popular requirements. Democracy needs to be reclaimed. Hence there is a need for a wide public debate linked with the Convention. Is there such a debate going on? This is questionable. Are the British and Irish churches doing anything (or going to do anything) to facilitate such a debate in the British Isles?

The next accession of new member states to the EU will be the biggest enlargement ever, with a 20 per cent increase in population; but there will be

only a 4 per cent increase in GDP. There will thus be a larger gap between rich and poor, and this will require solidarity and cohesion which are not being provided at the moment. In its submission to the debate CEC will highlight the fact that there is considerable interest in the candidate countries in affirming a community of values. There is also an interest in affirming unity in diversity. Most of the candidate countries were formerly communist. They are aware that one set of compulsory values could be replaced by another set. They have no desire to exchange the hegemony of Moscow for the hegemony of Brussels, however different they might be.

There is a real risk that the whole process might fail, which would be a tragedy for Europe as a whole.

Another challenge in the present situation relates to 'proximity policy': what will be the future of the EU's relationship with Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and the countries of the Mediterranean basin? This in turn raises the question of the relationships amongst the power centres: Europe, the USA, the Middle East, Moscow. Will there be an acceptance of US security concepts or is the EU ready to be a 'critical friend' of the USA? A European social model and the European social market concept could offer a distinctive contribution to the process of globalisation.

In the above context the question of ecumenical relations is of central importance. In Europe you find the main Christian traditions in substantial numbers: Protestantism, Anglicanism, Catholicism, Orthodoxy. The way we handle ecumenical matters in Europe in the coming years is going to be important from the world perspective.

The Challenges Facing the World Council of Churches (WCC)

Simon Oxley

Simon Oxley is the Team Coordinator of the Education and Ecumenical Formation Team at the WCC.

The WCC has cross-team groupings of staff who look at particular parts of the world. Being Moderator of the Europe Task Force gives me an overview of the concerns of the WCC in the region.

The WCC has traditionally had a dual attitude towards Europe. It has not regarded Western and Northern Europe as a focus for activity, except for fundraising. Since the fall of communism, however, the WCC has been active in Central and Eastern Europe. Here the WCC has to be careful not to tread on the toes of CEC.

Up to 30 per cent of the WCC constituency is in Central and Eastern Europe; but the region is also noted for a shortage of local Councils of Churches.

People often speak of a Protestant-Orthodox divide in the WCC; but this is a caricature. Neither the Protestants nor the Orthodox take a monolithic view. A special commission has been set up to look at the Orthodox position in the WCC. It will focus on the following areas:

1. Ecclesiology. The WCC is not a super-church and the different member-churches have different ecclesiological assumptions. What does it mean to be moving towards visible unity? What does mutual accountability in the WCC mean?
2. Common prayer (as opposed to common worship). There is the feeling that the kind of worship used in ecumenical gatherings blunts the differences between confessions while the nature of relations amongst those confessions has not been clearly articulated.
3. Consensus decision-making. Here the special commission will touch on a matter of concern to all member-churches, not just the Orthodox. The WCC has tended towards the consensus of the majority; there is a feeling among minority churches that their views are not given serious consideration.
4. Social and ethical issues. Again not just the Orthodox, but other churches too, are worried that the WCC sometimes takes its own line without taking account of the programmes of individual churches. The CTBI has evolved out of the BCC; but nothing similar has yet happened to the WCC, and it continues the pattern of operating parallel to the member-churches rather than articulating directly what those churches say.

There are various structural questions facing the WCC at the moment:

1. In future the WCC will need to be wary of admitting churches which don't have relations with other churches, even sometimes of their own denomination, in their own country.
2. There is also the question of how churches gain representation on the Central Committee. Some churches never seem to manage it.
3. When any organisation becomes an institution, there often evolves a tension between membership (which can be nominal and passive) and active involvement/belonging.

Other major issues facing the WCC include:

1. The question of globalisation and its social and economic effects. This is relevant to Europe: the Common Agricultural Policy, for example, keeps the door shut, and is of great concern to the developing world.
2. The Decade to Overcome Violence, inaugurated at Harare.
3. Konrad Raiser retires as General Secretary at the end of 2003, so this will be a time of change.
4. The WCC is facing a growing financial crisis.

Discussion

- There is often a tension between denominational structures and ecumenical activity. Many churches try to create structures within the WCC which will perpetuate their own denominational identity. The problem is compounded by the fact that many of those who work in the WCC have no experience of working with ecumenical structures but have background only in their own denomination. There is a higher proportion of people with an ecumenical background in CEC, but this is still an issue for CEC too. One practical consequence is that some national church structures have set up their own offices in Brussels, but the political structures there don't want to hear half a dozen church voices, and plead with CEC to get all the denominations to channel their views through CEC. One member observed that there seemed generally to be a move away from ecumenism to denominationalism.
- One member observed that for the churches in communist countries 'ecumenism' was something that happened elsewhere, with no effect on their everyday religious life. The findings of the commission looking at relations with the Orthodox may present the WCC with a make-or-break situation, in that the Central Committee may find that it can't accept the commission's proposals. Another member agreed that there was suspicion of ecumenism in Eastern Europe, but argued that it was largely confined to the hierarchs, while there was a lot of instinctive ecumenism among laypeople. He pointed out that in many Eastern European countries - Poland, for example - there was no knowledge of the 'mission and mandate' of the WCC, and said that the WCC should do much more to raise its profile in Eastern Europe and explain its aims as they relate to that part of the world. Another member warned against seeing the Orthodox churches as a homogeneous bloc: there is much scepticism in the Romanian and Bulgarian churches about the critical messages coming from Russia. Another member noted that the representatives to CEC and the WCC from the Orthodox churches in many countries, however, represent only themselves, and do not reflect any kind of mood in the country at large.
- What influence have the Basel and Graz Assemblies had on the development of CEC and the WCC? One concrete result has been the 'Charta Ecumenica', which was the result of discussions between CEC and the Council of Catholic Bishops' Conferences in Europe (CCEE). There are equivalent bodies to CEC in other continents, some of which have full Catholic membership.
- The experience of operating with Working Groups in the Church and Society Commission of CEC has been very mixed. Some have not worked as well as expected. Others have produced a series of weighty and authoritative reports on, for example, economic, social and environmental issues, and have engaged in real debate with the EU and Council of Europe structures. For some groups, for example on bioethics, the problem is that the various churches involved have widely different views; some papers have nevertheless been produced reflecting what consensus exists. Achieving a consensus takes time, however, and this causes problems when CEC is asked for a rapid response to an issue. There is also the question of how the reports of Working Groups are distributed: all too often they are not read by the relevant people in the member-churches.