

**The Challenges of Sibiu to the Churches and to Faith in Europe:
Elizabeth Fisher and Colin Williams**

Colin Williams

I would like to thank Faith in Europe for the work it does in highlighting in the UK the European Ecumenical Agenda.

The general consensus on EEA3 was that it was a positive if flawed occasion. The sense of excitement and anticipation has to some extent gone out of ecumenical life since the first European Ecumenical Assembly in Basel in 1989. But as one Lutheran delegate to the Assembly commented, Europe is still the only region in the world where the major Christian confessions are able to come together in this way. The general feeling of those present was to welcome the fact that the Assembly had taken place, and that it had enabled the major Christian traditions to speak to each other in so visible a way. The Assembly was offered by one delegate in a letter to me as a sign that there is still a strong will for the ecumenical journey to continue. Another delegate spoke of how the Assembly demonstrated that Christians in Europe need regular opportunities to celebrate our common roots and our common vision. There was also value attached by delegates to the fact that Sibiu showed that we were able to be open about the differences which still exist between us, as a basis on which to build further

Another delegate offered the image of the EEA3 as a place to stop and take breath before continuing on the ecumenical journey. Several delegates spoke of the EEA3 as signalling a clear will on the part of the churches of Europe to continue along the road of ecumenism.

Value was also attached to the fact that, with all the difficulties which the venue presented, the Assembly had taken place in an Eastern European, and specifically a Romanian and predominantly Orthodox context. The openness and welcome of the churches of Romania was much affirmed.

In reflecting on the future shape of European ecumenism, we also need to bear in mind the new context of migration in Europe since the end of the Cold War. Migrant churches are now frequently more vibrant than the local churches.

It was again demonstrated at Sibiu that one major task before us is to call churches to work together to meet the challenges of globalisation. The tendency has been for the European churches to be demonised: Europe has been seen as responsible for the ills of globalisation. CEC worked in advance of the WCC Assembly at Porto Alegre in 2006 to show European churches as part of the solution rather than part of the problem. We continued at that task, too, in Sibiu.

Elizabeth Fisher

The main thing for me at Sibiu was personal encounter amongst Christians of various traditions. I appreciated the important insight from Archbishop Anastasios that Christianity is multicoloured, like the different colours in the spectrum which make up white light. Being in Sibiu was important in this respect because it is a region where Orthodox, Catholics (Roman and Greek), Protestants and Jews have lived for centuries in harmony.

Great credit is due to Sibiu for organising the event: they've never done anything like this before.

There were many high-quality speakers. Cardinal Kasper talked about 'purifying memories': conversion and penance, renewal and reform. And every church has to start with itself. Everyone comes with their own church history, which is inseparable from their present.

The way we think about church is conditioned by our own history. Those with a Church of England background, for example, would never think of themselves as members of a diaspora church, as Protestants in France do.

One thing that became clear to me is that Christians in Eastern Europe are in a different place from where we are in the West. We worry about the churches being sidelined in society. This question does not arise in Eastern Europe. Romanian television broadcast the whole Assembly. I was impressed by local people we saw in Romania getting physically stuck into (re)building their churches.

So one big question for me is: How do we Christians in these islands deepen the encounter between Christians East and West?

This question is particularly pressing in the light of increasing migration in Europe today. The importance of the healing of memories is becoming ever clearer to me, and particularly so in the context of the East-West Christian encounter. At the moment 'proselytism' is the major neuralgic concept for the churches in CEC. Many in the East, especially the Orthodox, fear the unrestricted influx of new religions.

In this context, we need to evaluate progress in the dialogue with the Orthodox Churches. Here a major problem, once again, is loss of memory: the achievements of the previous stage of dialogue seem to have been forgotten when the next stage starts, so you're always back to square one.

The guidelines for European ecumenical activity are set out in the Charta Oecumenica, which was issued jointly by CEC and CCEE (the European Catholic bishops' organisation) in 2001. I was surprised to find that the Charta was basically unknown in Sibiu, including among church leaders, although it was church leaders who originally agreed it. And indeed the hierarchs of some Orthodox Churches in Eastern Europe actively disapprove of the text and have disassociated themselves from it.

Two more important questions for us are therefore: How can we make the Charta known, and how do we make use of it in our own constituencies?

Another task is to enable dialogue between majority and minority churches. The language used so far – majority/minority – is sociological language. We need to go further and find the appropriate theological language. There is need for hard work on the part of CEC to overcome paternalism. Here Faith in Europe can help to establish good practice. Another area where work is needed is in creating a common theology for dialogue with other faiths. A problem here is that many Christians from Eastern Europe don't acknowledge that Europe is multi-faith. Many from Eastern Europe can't believe that there are places in the UK where Christians are in a minority. There was a struggle over this

issue in drafting the Charta Oecumenica, and the final text contains commitment only to *respect* for Muslims and to working together on relevant common problems.

Faith in Europe could contribute by giving input on the theology of interfaith relations.

Finally, there is the need for us to try to involve young people. I was amazed and angered by the way young people were treated at Porto Alegre: they were sidelined and used as stewards. The situation was quite different in Sibiu: here they made a fantastic contribution. We need to be training young people as the ecumenical leaders of the future. In the UK, we can build for example on the work of Martin Conway at Selly Oak Colleges.

In my view Sibiu didn't move very much forward in ecumenical terms. But the theme of the Assembly was that the Light of Christ shines on all, and for me what became clear in the encounter was the continuing importance of the churches in Europe. We all need to bear witness to the Light of Christ in an age when people are so easily dazzled by the glare of secularism.

Colin Williams: Response

I noted great enthusiasm for ecumenism among the *delegates*, and they were often critical of their church leaderships. Real ecumenical work is being done in movements like Focolare, Taize, St Egidio. It is the question of how this can be harnessed to challenge the institutions which bedevils ecumenical activity.

Charta Oecumenica is taken very seriously in some countries, notably Germany and Scandinavia.

Another challenge is to help secular European organisations to engage more with the churches. There were three European Commissioners at Sibiu (one was Barroso).

I agree that you can't extend to Eastern Europe the Western European assumptions about the decline of religiosity. Issues of making the church accessible and relevant aren't on the agenda in Eastern Europe.

Tasks which Faith in Europe could take on would include: making Charta Oecumenica more widely known in the UK; taking forward any of the points in the Final Message; laying stress on local ecumenical work in the UK, for example pilgrimages.

Discussion

Kasper galvanised the Assembly, because he was willing to be penitent.

There was indeed a general enthusiasm for ecumenism at the Assembly, but also a sense of walking on eggshells.

Notwithstanding the current problems in ecumenical relations with the Orthodox, two outstanding speeches were made by Orthodox prelates. They both highlighted a series of relevant points in a telling way.

One flaw was the failure of the drafters of the Final Statement to listen to the Assembly. It seems that the text of the statement was decided largely in advance. None of the Forums got their way except that chaired by Arlington Trotman.

One problem was that the RC contribution was generally speaking defensive; they seemed to be participating on the proviso that nothing at Sibiu would change what was already agreed within the RC.

The Youth Message came from a pre-Sibiu assembly.

There is going to be an explosion in the Orthodox churches over the role of women. There is an ever-increasing number of them in Orthodox faculties, and they're increasingly articulate.

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Challenges from Sibiu for *Faith in Europe*: Summary

- To show that the European churches are part of the solution to globalisation rather than part of the problem.
- To promote the use of the Charta Oecumenica, and spreading knowledge of it throughout Europe.
- To promote theologically-based dialogue between majority and minority churches.
- To promote theologically-based work on interfaith relations.
- To encourage secular European organisations to engage more with the churches
- To involve young people, with a view to training the ecumenical leaders of the future.
- To take forward any of the points in the Sibiu Final Message
- To highlight local ecumenical work in the UK, for example pilgrimages