

RESULTS OF FOUR MEETINGS WHICH FED INTO THE FAITH IN EUROPE ONLINE CONSULTATION

We held four zoom sessions in the months leading up to the Big Meeting, and these are some of the points the participants wished to make to the EU. The 25 individuals who took part included four Professors, the National Rural Officer of the Church of England, two farmers with a national profile because of the imaginative initiatives on their farms. Three were citizens of the Czech Republic and three were from Switzerland. Nine have worked for considerable periods outside the UK, mostly in Europe. Four are Church Wardens in their local parishes. Most live in villages, though some are from urban areas. These are some of the points they wished to make to the EU.

The Importance of Faith Communities

The EU is secular, but it must begin to take 'religion' seriously.

(a) Numerous surveys show that 'religious people' make a net contribution to social life via voluntary 'work'

(b) Many faith organisations make a net contribution to society via educational establishments, hospitals, care homes for addicts, the handicapped and the elderly – quite apart from intangible support for individuals.

(c) Anecdotally, small settlements coped much better with Covid lockdowns than did the towns. Often this has been linked with the vibrancy of local faith communities

(d) All of this needs to be recognised. And those who make a net contribution to society deserve a place at the table where decisions are made.

(e) The EU also needs to recognise that the Faith Communities have a 'base' in almost every settlement. The EU could use this network for disseminating information – but only if they treat religion with the respect it deserves.

The Relevance of Cultural Religion to the Union

(a) Religion is built into the cultural make-up of most people – whether they are ‘practising’ or not. It is a powerful constituent in national and racial identity. (A recent survey reports that – despite two generations of Communist indoctrination - 75% of Russians say they are Orthodox Christians – even if they don’t practice or even believe).

(b) So, if the EU wishes to hold the Union together and cope with ‘nationalist populism’, the EU will need to come to terms with and understand ‘cultural’ religion. (Poland, Hungary, Russia). and work out how to integrate inherited religion/culture with the decision-making process. It has to understand it and to respect it, and not just to ignore it as ‘a left-over from the unenlightened past’.

The Importance of Religion for Minority Groups

(a) Two people who had lived and worked in Canada noted the importance of ‘religion’ for settling immigrants there of many faiths and denominations. Immigrants were ready to integrate with other Canadians, but usually went around with ‘their’ religious/cultural group.

(b) One practical example of this was highlighted by Input from Lothar Schullerus from Switzerland. Lothar was born and brought up in Transylvania – Roma country – and understands the needs and aspirations of Roma people in Eastern Europe.

The Roma don’t want (or need) money. They want ‘respect’ for their culture and way of life.

Their way of life is different from ‘ours’, but it is ‘valid’. If we don’t respect (and listen to) them, they are unlikely to respect and listen to us.

The EU (we) should abandon trying to force them to assimilate with ‘us’ -- to change and become like us.

The faith groups have a prophetic role to play in arguing this at national and, above all, at local level.

(c) What is true of the Roma is also true for the many other minority groups in the EU – Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, etc. – and is clearly very important if we are to understand how best to settle immigrants and refugees. To understand, ‘deal with’, this situation, EU

must take the religious/cultural background of those arriving to live with us seriously – and respect it.

(d) The Faith Communities have a natural role as listeners and mediators, and should be able and willing to encourage ‘respectful dialogue’ between parties.

Religious tolerance in a Multi-faith Society

The EU is becoming an Inter-Faith Society , and this has dangers as well as opportunities.

(a) The challenge to liberal democratic values from extreme forms of faith systems, enforced through totalitarian political systems, which, because they may not be challenged by political process, leads inevitably to dictatorship and denial of human rights.

(b) We see examples of this historically and currently among all faiths, the foremost current example being Islamic extremism. But for 500 years Europe was torn apart by war between Catholic and Protestant Christians. And even now American evangelicalism represents a threat, not perhaps of open warfare, but to democratic values. Even Buddhists, supporters of seemingly the most peaceable of faiths are not immune. So the danger is always there:

(c) But Europe, drawing on its troubled history, has evolved systems of government to contain the pressures extreme faith systems can apply to the body politic, and it can speak with authority. Over the centuries, Europe managed eventually to work out a compromise, by which citizens of all faiths and none could participate, immune from domination by any particular extreme faith system. If the EU is to reap the benefits of a multi-faith society it needs to understand this history and encourage ‘religious tolerance’.

Security Issues

(a) Despite Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, the Arab Spring – the Western European values of freedom, equality before the law, religious tolerance, human rights ARE good and need to be protected. Refugees don’t wish to go to China or Russia or even America. They want to come to Western Europe. The EU was founded on Christian values. But these values have become eroded and need to be re-drawn for our multicultural world.

(b) Most of us in our zoom groups were all of an age to remember the War and the Cold War. Pavel and Jan from the Czech Republic in particular had lived through Communist dictatorship. They felt that the chief priority for the EU is security, along with NATO, to defend our freedom and values (as above).

(c) Freedom of movement, for employment, social interaction, academic exchange, police exchange of information, holidays, retirement, have been very important for mutual understanding between our nations, and what went with it was very practical. (Health, social care, availability). This is now up in the air, and the EU and the UK must strive to remove unnecessary obstacles. It benefits both sides. All members of our group think of themselves as European – or even international citizens. Cultural, educational, academic links across the Channel are vital for both sides, and must be kept open. Erasmus, passports, visas, visits.

(d) One group noted that It is encouraging that EU wanted UK to be involved in the consultation exercise,

Migration/Immigration

(a) Migration/Immigration. We need to recognise that migration has always happened – for environmental, religious, persecution, financial reasons AND ALWAYS WILL CONTINUE TO HAPPEN. They are people – and Jesus was one of them. It's a problem that won't go away because Western Europe is the obvious place to aim for. It's a 'Dick Whittington off to London' situation.

(b) Need for a Commission to work for joined- up international thinking about this (EU and EEU nations together); not just fire-fighting, but coherent planning for the future.

(c) Immigration also underlines the need for Europe to have an international policy – notably with the Mediterranean nations and with Africa. Immigration would be at a minimum if people felt safe where they are. And Western Europe has some responsibility for the present situation in many of these countries.

Young People

Twenty-year-olds are afraid about war (in Europe and beyond), and afraid about the implications of climate change. **For them, the stakes are very high.**

Climate Change and Conservation

(a) 'The ecological crisis is already upon us – from which there is no self-isolation'. This has to be a top priority.

(b) "In the 1960s the environment was technicolour. Now it is black and white".

(c) The Climate change 'emergency'. The EU recognises the problem. It must plan for 'energy transitions'.

(d) There is a need for simple advice to individuals/groups/organisations/industries about what they can do to improve carbon footprint. The 'global' issue is too big for us and we just scream at each other. What we need is practical feet-on-the-ground do's and don'ts. This would be best given by an independent group: (Thunburg/Attenborough). Dictates from politicians we no longer trust.

(e) Need for faith communities to tackle the carbon footprint of their buildings.

(f) Tackling climate change is vital and very complex, but here again, the project is bedevilled by shrill, angry slogans. The EU – and the faith communities -- need to encourage **informed, respectful dialogue.**

Agriculture and Local Employment

(a) One aspect of tackling the climate change emergency is to consider "what we eat". Obesity, Health, Vegetarianism, methane emissions. We need 'respectful dialogue' about the future structure of 'regenerative' agriculture, not shrill shouting at farmers. With this goes animal welfare, food imports and control of supermarkets.

(b) Farm shops, often 'organic', show that there is an appetite for healthy eating of local produce. The Covid lockdowns highlighted the trend.

The EU needs to 'assist' such diversification, not least because of the health dangers of obesity.

(c) Young Working People. Every 'healthy' settlement needs a mix of age groups – particularly young people of working age. This means the EU needs to help to ensure that young people of working age can live in rural areas (housing), have access to fast broadband, have a choice of employment – (not just agricultural), and have opportunity for social interaction. A broad challenge but it must be addressed.

(d) Agriculture has always been a central concern of the EU. All the more so now because of the related issues of climate change, re-wilding, animal care, conservation and 'healthy eating'. It's vital. Setting up mechanisms for respectful dialogue between farmers and 'evolution activists'. Shouting slogans MUST give way to listening and mutual understanding.

(e) Because of these pressures there is currently huge emotional and 'mental' pressure on farmers and farming families, and particularly on small farmers. Members from small family farms are often key players in 'healthy' local community life – but are increasingly made to feel that many see them as public enemy No 1. (A remarkable number of current TV/Radio programmes in UK – apart from the Archers - revolve around this theme). So there is a need for the EU to enable serious support for farmers and farming families: in particular there is an urgent need to cut red-tape paperwork to a minimum.

The Importance of Small Settlements

Small rural settlements are no longer simply 'the shop floor of agriculture': but they continue to be valued for their contribution to health and well-being, and as a template for neighbourly community life. They have obvious disadvantages, but they still need 'central' support.

The Importance of Faith Communities in Small Settlements.

Our UK experience is as follows.

(a) If the Church works for and is open to everyone, and is seen to serve and identify with local community, virtually everyone values it. As an example from our groups, Shipton Moyne Parish Trust was founded, primarily to support the village church – and among other things – to help pay for clerical assistance. Everyone is willing to chip in.

(b) With small numbers in a small settlement, you can ‘know’ everyone who lives there, and it becomes clear that, whether they are regular attenders at Church or not, 80% want the Church. You can also ‘see’ how the Church contributes to the community in quiet, undramatic ways – as during the Covid lockdown. ‘Love your neighbour’ means something in the village context. Because of small numbers it is also noticeable that people with different opinions and of different faiths do not shout at each other. It is a place where ‘respectful dialogue’ can and does happen.

(c) Young people want church, but just can’t manage to get there often. They are exhausted after 6 days’ work and have numerous alternative possibilities at the weekend for their children (and themselves). But they do respond to ‘special’ services – Christmas, Animals, Remembrance, Baptisms etc.

(d) Difficulty of keeping Church vibrant in rural areas because of falling numbers of ‘professionals’. This means that ‘volunteers/lay people’ have got to ‘do it for themselves’. They need confidence to do this, authorisation and support from the professionals, and appropriate training. This is a new way of doing things for professionals, but it is the only alternative to abandoning the regular worship of God in the church and settlement.

So, churches in rural settlements make a net contribution to the community and are valued. Church organisations need to recognise this and give intelligent support. So does the EU. And those who make a net contribution to society deserve a place at the table where decisions are made.

Subsidiarity

Localism and Centralism. On the one hand, the need to recover genuine subsidiarity. On the other, the need for more integration. Keeping Europe together is all important - and mighty difficult.

A Perspective from Switzerland.

“The EU should be thinking less about what more it can do - but instead about what less it can do. Both the lesson of Brexit and respect for people and individuals is that people and communities want more say in their own lives. This is not the most efficient way to organise but it is the way that most empowers people and communities.

It is interesting to note that in Brexitland there is very little local identity below British nation level. In most of Europe local identities are much stronger. In Switzerland there is strong local identity and control - to the level where individual Cantons are responsible for their Cantonal teacher training, which isn't always valid in neighbouring Cantons! In most ways(although not all), Switzerland is a wonderful place to live.

However, some things work much better when done together. Here the Swiss railways come to mind. Efficient, useful, connecting - maybe they are the model for Europe! The railways do actually connect well across Europe. I think this has been achieved by countries working together rather than any higher authority taking control of them. So, I would say an important part of the EU is to encourage a culture of cooperation.

The Swiss regularly vote. They feel they all have a say, and are ready to accept decisions that are made that they don't agree with because of this. Before each vote they are sent a summary of the main points from both viewpoints, which are viewed as factually accurate.”

We hope that these points, made by very well-informed people, may be of value as you work out the future priorities for the EU