

Key points from Faith in Europe conference morning breakout groups, 21st October 2021

Notes by Matthew Ross based on Group Reports

What Are the Issues?

- **Climate change/climate justice.**

Urgently important, with the COP26 in Glasgow taking on an urgent significance

European industrialisation a cause, gives us special responsibility

Key to political action is public opinion, and churches have potential to influence it. There is a need to be prophetic, recognising that there is still resistance to change from many voters – especially if there is a direct and personal financial cost (such as having to sell a car or install a new heating system). Will there be the political will to keep the momentum going, or whether ‘climate change’ and ‘climate justice’ will go out of fashion if the going gets too tough?

The EU has competency on environmental matters and faith communities need to be able to offer well thought through analyses, including diversity of opinions among the various stakeholders, to the EU.

- **Migration – in the context of economic opportunity, escape from persecution and rising levels of population.**

What makes life so intolerable in own country that people risk travelling to Europe? War, poverty, climate change

Distinction politicians make between ‘refugees’ and ‘economic migrants’ unfair and discriminatory

Frequent pattern: initial sympathy to migrants gives rise to eventual antipathy – a problem for democracies

Need for churches to lead and influence public opinion, and need to convince voters

Our responsibility for migration situations: climate change, arms sales, our prosperity based on resources stolen from ‘developing world’

We need to repent of our colonialist past (and present)

We need to share prosperity and justice

Black Lives Matter has begun to raise consciousness of our responsibility for world inequality

And another matter which actually relates to both of above: Far-right populism

Hungary and Poland in particular defending Christendom, keeping Islam out

- **Human dignity**

There is a considerable and growing problem with hate speech, particularly in the context of social media. Social media companies have become immensely powerful, yet is virtually unregulated and untaxed. The EU has the capacity to address this in a way that smaller countries cannot.

The issue of misogyny has to be addressed. The World Council of Churches has its “Thursdays in Black” campaign against violence against women. Such issues need far more prominence from political leaders in order to build a truly inclusive society. The danger of weakening international law in this area is real and needs to be resisted. The issue of LGBT rights must also be considered.

- **The need to engage with the other multilateral instruments in Europe, notably the Strasbourg-based Council of Europe and the Vienna-based OSCE.**

UK has a particular responsibility to engage with both, having left the EU.

Danger of a potential UK withdrawal from the ECHR.

Impacts on ordinary people in UK of leaving the EU, e.g. Covid app, Erasmus and travel.

- **Democratic deficit**

Disconnect between institutions and ordinary citizens: failure to address this in the context of subsidiarity. How far has this led to the rise of far right populism?

The EU’s use of soft power can be undermined by its other activities (e.g. Frontex): conflicting aid and development policies.

The situation of Ireland, straddling the Brexit rift, is a potential threat to peace. There are potential problems arising from the lack of NI representation in EU institutions while remaining part of the single market.

- **Role of religious leaders**

Particular role in promoting health (vaccines +), and the WCC’s support for the World Health Organisation in addressing Ebola several years ago.

There has been a failure of the state in addressing Covid-19 in many cases, with mixed messages sent out. Europe has not seen extreme failures (such as Brazil under Bolsonaro), but still serious concerns. Why is the infection rate in the UK so high, for example? Failure to

pursue universal vaccination by (e.g.) waiving patent protections and the lack of promised vaccines to the COVEX campaign.

- **Need to revive European ideals: a contemporary reinterpretation of Jacques Delors' quest for a "Soul of Europe".**

The EU has not yet understood how much faith groups give to civic society. Nor has it understood how to deal with the cultural/religious mix which, if handled badly, can lead to the exploitation of religion by populist groups. Faith groups need to find, or create, a platform which will enable them to speak to the EU, whilst remaining fundamentally 'grass roots' in approach – not an easy challenge. Churches must support and defend minority groups – whether indigenous (e.g. Roma) or immigrant (e.g. Muslim) – for freedom of religion impacts us all in every aspect of life.

The EU needs to develop a different model of Laïcité: one which is more inclusive of faith, and which enters into open dialogue with faith groups.

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