



Governing Board, Online 18-19 Nov 2020
Agenda Item: 14
Document Name: 2GB2020_DOC14 CEC'S CALL AND WITNESS
Purpose: To be received

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CEC's Call and Witness – A Discussion Paper

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The Background

In the Report of the General Secretary to the CEC Governing Board in June 2020, I observed that due to the virtual nature of that meeting, it was not the time to make substantial decisions on a future structure and work portfolio of the organisation. Hence, I appealed “that the Governing Board [...] received my report with a view to deeper analysis in November”, having the second Governing Board meeting of 2020 in mind.

On this background the Governing Board decided that “the General Secretary [was] to circulate, in advance of the next Governing Board meeting, a discussion paper setting out ideas for the future organisation and work of CEC, developing inter alia the themes of ownership, coherence and visibility as sketched out in pages 4 and 5 of his report”.

The present document, **CEC's Call and Witness**, is the requested “discussion paper”. It is worth noting, that the expectation in June 2020 was to conduct a physical meeting in November this year with some in-depth discussions and exchanges of opinions over several days. Circumstances, however, have turned out differently and the Governing Board is again meeting as a virtual gathering with the restrictions on the inter-personal relationships this implies.



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The Potential

The current context and nature of the Governing Board meeting have an impact on the shape and scope of the discussion the Governing Board can pursue. I do not believe a meeting conducted virtually is suited as a forum for comprehensive decision-making on the future organisation and work of CEC. For that, we need to physically sit together, take coffee breaks, split up in groups, sense the atmosphere in the room. Neither of which is satisfactorily done in virtual meetings.

I do believe, however, that - within this somehow limited framework - you as Governing Board will be able to engage in an exchange that can at least partly give you an impression of how I see the current state of the organisation, and at least partly supply me with some input on how the Governing Board assess the organisational needs as identified in this discussion paper after 10 months of talks, dialogues, interviews and observations.

CEC comes with 60 years of history as a significant European church institution. CEC possesses tremendous potential also in the future. But CEC suffers from a number of inherent impediments that stifle development and prohibits the agility needed to release this potential. You as Governing Board are in a unique position to act constructively on this as the political and strategic body of CEC, designated with the power to “ensure effective organisational and strategic planning”.¹

The Patience

It must be taken into consideration, however, that there is no such thing as a “quick fix” that will solve all problems and take on all challenges CEC is facing. Neither you as Governing Board nor I as managing General Secretary can make things happen overnight. If CEC is to improve on “ownership”, “coherence” and “visibility”, my three featured key terms in June, we need a concerted effort, mutual support and shared patience.

Working towards this discussion paper, I have interviewed some 25 stakeholders, including staff, Governing Board members, church leaders and ecumenical officers from Member Churches. Ensuring reflection of CEC diversity, this has given me valuable insights into the perception of CEC as a member organisation. It has also confirmed to me that issues of “ownership”, “coherence” and “visibility” are correspondingly significant terms to the CEC constituency.

Lastly, it has taught me that there is no “one way forward” – expectations and prospects are varied and wide-ranging and some hard decision will eventually have to be made. Generally speaking, however, there seems to be an agreement at least on a principle level, that CEC must take

¹ Constitution of the Conference of European Churches Art. 11 (9) states that “The Governing Board shall, in particular, have the following powers:
– review periodically the Conference's strategic statements (vision, mission and values) for accuracy and validity and where necessary propose amendments to the General Assembly; [...]
– determine and monitor the Conference's programmes, services and working groups; [...]
– ensure effective organisational and strategic planning; [...]”.



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advantage of being

- ...a platform for theological dialogue on church and church and society in Europe
- ...a member organisation with a vast network of skilled and capable resources
- ...present in the heart(s) of European decision making, Brussels and Strasbourg

This is basically a reflection of what CEC is today, which is indeed reaffirming. The challenge is how to organise work in a way that is both fulfilling for Member Churches and adequate for CEC with the capacity currently at our hands. Or in other words: How does CEC as a networked church organisation take full advantage of its position vis-à-vis European Institutions? This is the real question.

The Challenge

Below I identify two fundamental challenges for the Governing Board to address. I am not calling for concrete solutions. Such are worked out by the management in cooperation with the relevant decision-making bodies appointed by the Governing Board. When solutions have been created with due respect to financial and personnel consequences, it is the right - and indeed the duty - of the Governing Board to choose between change models.

This Governing Board meeting is an opportunity to discuss a few selected matters among you to establish an impression of how you as a joint Governing Board see the situation. Likewise, it is your opportunity to ask for my opinion on organisational shortcomings and needs as I see them, and similarly to inquire into my observations, analyses, diagnostics and suggestions for potential solutions.

What I call for with my two organisational challenges below – phrased as straight forward, critical observations for the Governing Board to take into consideration – is an exchange between you from which we can establish if you find my accounts of the current context of the organisation appropriate to pursue as a foundation for a way forward. In that case, I trust we can move on together with a view to more substantial changes that will have a positive impact on ownership, coherence and visibility of the organisation.

Or to phrase it in the form of a question:

- Do I as CEC General Secretary have the mandate from the Governing Board to work together with the political leadership of CEC and the staff team towards strategic models and solutions that address the two observations and eventually submit them to you for decision-making?



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The Observations

Observation 1

CEC needs a stronger theological foundation for all its work

Brussels and Strasbourg bursts from (I)NGOs, interest organisations and commercial companies struggling to catch the attention of decision-makers and civil servants in the European institutions. Whilst as a church-based organisation neither being able to nor seeking the financial ability to support a huge set-up of lobbyists emphasising their impact on legislation and the general development of our societies, CEC does in fact – due to our faith-based status - enjoy a variety of advantages.

First and foremost, Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU) introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon, provides a legal basis for a so-called “open, transparent and regular dialogue between the EU institutions and churches, religious associations, and philosophical and non-confessional organisations”. This is recognised with dedicated secretariats and civil servants in both the European Commission and European Parliament.

In both cases, a high-ranking decision-maker is appointed responsible for this dialogue and CEC enjoys regular exchanges with the institutions. This is a privileged position given to CEC that must be exploited - in the best possible understanding of that term - to the full. CEC is not merely invited but expected - together with other, comparable organisations - to contribute to the development of the continent.

What is most significant is the fact that CEC is invited as a faith-based organisation, (currently) representing 114 churches, and expected to have a faith-based view on current issues. This potentially makes CEC stand out from the crowd of competing (I)NGOs, interest organisations and commercial companies mentioned above. But is CEC equipped adequately to take on this role and position itself as the main player its size and historical significance indicates it to be?

CEC currently employs a number of theologians. However, only one is dedicated full time to theology related activities - and this mainly in the area of more classic ecumenical dialogue of a doctrinal nature. Such classic ecumenical dialogue has a long tradition in CEC, but since the merger between CEC and Church in Society Commission, CEC has not managed to develop the theological work of the organisation in a manner that supports and fully integrates with the dialogue and advocacy work vis-a-vis the institutions.

The question is, if CEC has reached a point where investment in theological study and development is required to stand out as a faith-based, Christian organisation with a message into the wider society, and grounded on a stronger, more dedicated theological foundation than the one we can claim today? To secure CEC as a consistent Art. 17 partner, representing the view of churches in Europe, the entire work portfolio from CEC's side must be theologically reflected, taking into account the diversity of traditions represented in the CEC constituency.

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In order to explore how we as churches make and sustain the best impact on the future of Europe, establishing and developing the unique position of CEC, a more systematic approach is needed on the role and potential of theological reasoning, the church and faith in wider society. This will be an effort that supports the work of CEC as a church organisation in Brussels and Strasbourg but also has a role to play within individual Member Churches.

Such a move would be expected to have a positive impact on:

- Ownership** – *a stronger theological foundation will attract the attention of more Member Churches and reflect some of the CEC constituencies' burning issues of church/state/society.*
- Coherence** – *theological studies and reflections from a mixed in-house group form the foundation for CEC's work and will foster a sound, professional interdependence among staff.*
- Visibility** – *a stronger focus on theological reflection and the role of such in wider society will distinguish CEC as a significant church-based player that stands out from the crowd.*

Observation 2

CEC is attempting to do too much and is ending up doing too little.

CEC consists of a wide and diverse constituency. This is a hallmark of the organisation. It means, however, that interests and requests regarding the work portfolio of the organisation follow a similar “wide and diverse” pattern. This is reflected in the Constitution of the Conference of European Churches, Article 2: “Aims and activities (vision, mission and values)”, which is listing a comprehensive package of overarching aims.²

Supplemented with a list of thematic areas³ on which CEC is due to work “in particular”, and adding to this what is termed “programmatic development and research” calling for four working methodologies⁴ with the purpose of “strengthen[ing] the bonds of Christian fellowship”, the constitution of the Conference is comprehensive in what CEC is expected to achieve.⁵

² Promoting “a community of Churches sharing their spiritual life, seeking reconciliation, strengthening their common witness and service, and fostering the unity of the Church” through “providing an authentic, credible and socially responsible Christian witness” by which CEC “will work towards building a humane, social and sustainable Europe at peace with itself and its neighbours in which human rights and solidarity prevail” (Art. 2.1 (2)).

³ (3) The Conference commits itself, on the basis of the conciliar process of justice, peace and the integrity of creation, to continued work in particular in the following thematic areas:

- ecclesiology and theology;
- diaspora and migrant Churches, and mission;
- asylum and migration;
- youth and intergenerational dialogue;
- social responsibility and human rights.

⁴ (4) [...] the Conference

- is an instrument of the Churches for common mission in a changing Europe;
- commits itself to continuous dialogue among its Members, providing them with a space for giving and receiving the spiritual riches of their different traditions;
- facilitates dialogue and cooperation with Roman Catholic partners and with other faith communities;
- encourages Churches to speak with a common voice wherever possible.

⁵ A vast work programme, the so-called “Strategy Plan 2019 – 2023” has afterwards been established, fleshing out in details the directions given in the Constitution.



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CEC - to an overwhelming degree - lives up to the "aims and activities" thus indicated in the Constitution of The Conference of European Churches. Going through the Executive Secretaries' reporting on the table of the Governing Board at this meeting one can find more or less all working areas and methodologies represented and reported. It must be mentioned, though, that in some instances CEC deposits substantial resources outside the organisation to live up to the expectations, such as in the case of CCME for example.

However, it is enough to cover everything? Or need we take a look at *how* we cover and to *which extend* we cover everything? We must be aware that CEC works with less staff today than at any time in the recent history of the organisation.

Programmatic work is currently covered by three full-time executive positions and two part-time seconded positions (60% and 25% respectively). On top hereof, the Governing Board has appointed from its midst a volunteer working in her spare time with the youth in the organisation. One executive position supposed to cover "social responsibility" is vacant after a planned seconded position (90%) has encountered legal issues relating to Belgian labour law.

The current staffing situation combined with extensive visions and concrete work areas of the constitution and work plan comes with a heavy price tag: Work dispersion and the consequential dilution of the impact CEC has on the areas identified as organisational work areas. The question is: is CEC due to make a strategic turn away from a plethora of work areas and focus on less, thus allowing better preparation, sharper execution, and improved follow-up – altogether achieving a higher impact overall?

A better focus would in this case partly be based on the current priorities of the European Institutions – monitored and assessed by the secretariat and resulting in more direct access to the decision-makers - partly based on the identification of skills and interests that constitute CEC as a theologically reflected church-based organisation of Member Churches combined with the offices in Brussels and Strasbourg.

Such a move would be expected to have a positive impact on:

Ownership – *more time and resources allocated to cooperation and coordination with Member Churches on less, however more topical, issues will lead to increased ownership.*

Coherence – *a narrower scope of work areas and a subsequent reallocation of secretariat resources secure shared accountability and improves consistency among staff.*

Visibility – *a sharper, focused work agenda with comprehensive preparation, execution and follow-up deepens the CEC impact in Brussels and Strasbourg and cooperation with Member Churches.*



Conference of European Churches
Conférence des Églises européennes
Konferenz Europäischer Kirchen
Конференция Европейских Церкве

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The Invitation

My presentation during the closed session of the upcoming meeting will include additional aspects from my observations and findings, some that will support my case and the overall argument.

With this discussion paper, I invite the Governing Board to an exchange among you, addressing the questions raised with a view to CEC as a particular and outstanding organisation, and one that has a specific role to play. Not only in history books but also in its reinvention of itself as an agile platform for European Churches with a commitment to European society today.

As mentioned above, my dialogues with church leaders and ecumenical officers in Member Churches confirmed that issues of “ownership”, “coherence” and “visibility” are correspondingly significant terms to the CEC constituency. Experience tells us that the three also constitute challenges that are from time to time faced by many of our Members. CEC is not alone.

My particular invitation is therefore to approach the situation with trust that CEC like other institutions and organisations is capable of finding good sustainable solutions. Solutions based on the skills and experience that CEC comprises in the secretariat and throughout its network of Member Churches, and solutions founded on the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

I look forward to listening to your questions, positions and thoughts and not least to our continued cooperation for a strong, dedicated and contemporary Conference of European Churches.

Jørgen Skov Sørensen
General Secretary, CEC
November 10, 2020