

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE RESPONSES TO THE OPEN LETTER BY CHURCHES AND PARTNERS?

So far 15 responses have been published on the website of the CEC.

The below is based upon these 15 plus the draft response by the Quakers and the Protestant Church in the NL which were made available to me (not yet on website).

Most responses welcome both the Open Letter and the proposal for a dialogue on the future of Europe at the next Assembly. However, quite a few comments are made and questions raised. I have attempted to provide a summary below.

1. Which Europe?

Many responses raise the issue that the OL is not clear about Europe.

There are concerns about the EU-centrism in the OL (*C o C Ireland, Church of Norway, Church of England, Swiss Prot. Fed.*).

Are we addressing the future of the EU or the much larger Council of Europe. Are we sufficiently aware that e.g. the Salvation Army has branches in some 34 European countries, an area much larger than the EU? Moreover this is true for CEC itself, including member churches from Eastern European countries which are not (yet) members of the EU. As is pointed out ‘CEC is part of the wider European Home’ (*Church of Norway*).

‘What kind of Europe do we want beyond the boundaries of the EU?’ (*Church of England, Church of Norway*).

Some member churches responding are located in countries which are not members of the EU (Norway, Switzerland) or indeed in the process of leaving the Union (the UK).

Some responses are quite clear about this deficit in the OL: ‘the voice of Eastern Europe is not really heard in the OL’ (*Church of Denmark*). Several just comment that ‘Europe is larger than the EU’ (*C o C NL, Quakers*)

Some go even further and point out that we really need a new vision that goes beyond the boundaries of the EU and envisages a larger Europe including e.g. relations with Russia (*Church and Peace*). Some even argue that there is a need for a vision on the future of a larger Europe in its global context (*Ev. Church of Baden, Quakers*).

2. Theological reflection.

Several responses observe that there is a lack of theological reflection in the OL (*Church of Denmark, C o C Ireland, Church of England*) And this while it is also felt that there is a need to ‘make both koinonia and diaconia realities’ (*Church of Ireland, Church of Norway*). One response even states that ‘God is hardly mentioned’ in the OL (*Sil. Church of the Czech Rep*). Last, but not least an important question raised in relation to this is whether the Charta Oecumenica –after nearly 17 years- is still upheld as a common basis by the churches.... (*Prot. Church of Belgium*).

3. Need for a new vision.

Several responses agree that there is a need for a new, a fresh (*Salvation Army*) vision.

A vision not based on an idealized past, but speaks to the present and (the needs in) the future (*Swiss Prot. Fed., Prot. Church of Belgium, Salvation Army*).

An 'ethically driven vision' which reconsiders the (shared) values (*Faith in Europe*).

A vision that addresses both the economic challenges and the democratic deficit (*Swiss Prot. Fed.*). Basically 'there is a need for a prophetic voice from the churches' (*Faith in Europe*).

This would require a 'clearer analysis of the political, social and cultural context' - see comments about global context above- (*Church of England*). In doing so we should ask ourselves 'what creates a community of values in pluralistic society that Europe is today?' (*Church of Norway*).

Whilst developing this new vision it should speak 'the language of hope' (*C o C Ireland*) and be 'a positive narrative reaffirming the shared values the EU is founded upon' (Church and Peace). This could provide for a 'forward-looking transformational policy-framework building on the SDG-Agenda' and 'provide for a much-needed new civil contract for the future' (Church and Peace). In other responses too it is felt that solidarity, sustainability and subsidiarity are the key dimensions of this new vision (*Ev. Church of Germany/EKD*).

As for the latter, the 'Swiss pluralistic political model with a great deal of emphasis on subsidiarity could offer an example to the future development of the EU' (*Swiss Prot. Fed.*).

'Breathe greater life into subsidiarity' (*Faith in Europe*). Churches might bring their experience with unity in diversity (*C o C NL*) to this development. Last, but not least decision-making in the European institutions should become more transparent and accountable (*Faith in Europe*).

4. The dominant economic model.

Quite a few responses see tackling inequality and poverty as urgent issues (*C o C NL, Church and Peace, Ev. Church of Germany/EKD, Salvation Army*).

Fundamentally the rather narrow economic focus of the EU latterly is seen as a cause here (*C o C NL, Faith in Europe, Quakers, Prot. Church in the NL*). Interestingly the question is raised as to why 'there is no discussion on basic/universal income' in the OL (*Swiss Prot. Fed.*) and a 'a shared trans-European welfare standard' is called for (*Faith in Europe*).

Reform is necessary to re-assert 'the primacy of politics over economics' (*Faith in Europe*). The SDG-Agenda is seen as a way forward towards a circular, sustainable, socially inclusive and low-carbon economy, which requires the transformation of energy-, agricultural- and transport-policies (*Church and Peace*). Here, examples should be given how shared values can be translated into concrete policies by the EU in a way that is relevant to our daily lives (*Ev. Church of Baden*).

5. The EU to remain a peace project.

Concerns were raised about a possible military dimension of EU policies which would be contrary to the EU as a peace project. Instead the EU should strengthen peace building, development assistance and the SDG Agenda (*Church and Peace*). The EU should remain dedicated to peace and reconciliation (*Ev. Church of Germany/EKD*). Arms industry and militarization should be curbed. 'Yes to Europe as a peace project, no to militarization: Europe should be a continent at peace with itself and the wider world!' (*Quakers*).

A special concern is noted from Ireland that the Brexit may result in a new hard border between the Republic and Northern Ireland which could potentially give rise to renewed violence in the region (*Church of Ireland*).

6. Dialogue with whom?

The OL proposes to have a dialogue between the member churches of CEC at the next Assembly. However it is felt that before that CEC should first of all seek cooperation on the topic of the future of Europe with its Roman Catholic counterpart at Brussels -COMECE- (*C o C NL, Prot. Church of Belgium*).

Secondly, several responses urge CEC to also enter into dialogue on the 'common' values with representatives of other religions, to seek an interreligious dialogue on this theme (*Ev. Church of Germany/EKD, Ev. Church of Baden, Quakers*).

Thirdly, one response gave the advice to also seek the dialogue with those in our societies who oppose the European project (*Prot. Church in the NL*).

Finally the question was raised whether the (next version of the) OL is also an invitation to the European Institutions to a dialogue on the shared values underpinning the European vision (*Church of Norway*)?

7. Difference in attitude between generations.

In the experience of some member churches there is remarkable lack of historical awareness when discussing the European project. Younger generations generally have no idea about the reasons why the EU was founded. There is a lack of historical awareness (*Faith in Europe*) 'The younger generations seem alienated from the EU' (*C o C Ireland*).

A peaceful life has become so self-evident (to the younger generations) that it no longer speaks to the people's condition! (*Ev. Church of Germany/EKD*). Obviously for any relevant dialogue on a vision the future of Europe the participants at the Assembly need to be reminded of the history and origins of the European project, albeit briefly.

8. Assembly.

A number of interesting questions on the Assembly came up in the responses.

One is what the methodology for the dialogue on the future of Europe will be at the Assembly (*Swiss Protestant Fed.*). In this context it was also suggested that there is a need to analyze the role of CEC and the churches in Europe more critically (*Prot. Church in the NL*). At a recent meeting of the Baltic and Nordic churches where the OL was discussed the MEP Margrete Auken also mentioned that 'churches should position themselves better to engage with the European Institutions'.

9. Up-dated version of the Open letter?

Several member churches felt that –in the light of the responses- we might need an up-dated version of the Open Letter to serve as a basis for the dialogue at the Assembly (*Church of Denmark, Church of England*).