

A Vision of Neighbourly Love

A response by The Salvation Army¹ to the CEC Open Letter, *What Future for Europe?*



Introduction

The following response to the open letter from CEC is a joint response from The Salvation Army in the United Kingdom Territory with the Republic of Ireland and The Salvation Army International Headquarters, both of which are members of CEC.

The open letter focuses mainly on the European Union (EU), but our response will encompass all of Europe given that The Salvation Army exists in 34 European countries, not all of which are members of the European Union.

Europe and the European Union

Our approach to membership of the EU – and in particular, to Brexit – is strictly neutral. The issue was divisive during the 2016 UK referendum and continues to be so. We believe it is not a matter on which there is a definitive Christian position. Indeed during the Brexit referendum Christians took positions on both sides of the debate, although as far as we are aware, only one UK church made a public statement in support of a particular position.² Sadly, the referendum debate was often characterised on both sides by misunderstanding, intolerance, and divisive rhetoric – and some people have used the result to justify racial abuse. We can certainly take a Christian view of these responses and condemn them without reservation.

Having said that we have no position on EU membership, and being fully aware of its faults and limitations, we acknowledge all that the EU has achieved in terms of peace, security, understanding, cooperation, human rights, economic and social development, and humanitarian aid. We believe that the values that have underpinned such achievements are, or should be, part of our common humanity and so are relevant for every European country, whether or not it is a member of the EU.

A vision of Europe

In order to have a clear vision we need to look in three directions: at the past, at the present, and to the future. Views of the past and the present, with the positive and negative realities that they reveal, will help us to have a clearer view of the future.

Looking back we see a Europe that, until the middle of the twentieth century, was characterised by war and misunderstanding. In the second half of the century a cold war of suspicion and threat developed, but alongside this and under its shadow, there was, in Western Europe, a growing realisation of unity and cooperation, and a rising prosperity. Much of this was achieved as part of, and under the influence of, an enlarging EU. Since the early 1990s we have seen the end of the cold war, the rise of democracy, and a growing sense of European unity.

¹ 'The Salvation Army, an international movement, is an evangelical part of the universal Christian Church. Its message is based on the Bible. Its ministry is motivated by the love of God. Its mission is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and to meet human needs in his name without discrimination.' (International Mission Statement)

² The Church of Scotland General Assembly in May 2016 reaffirmed its belief that 'the UK should remain in the EU'.

Looking at Europe today we see many of the achievements of past decades being threatened by changing circumstances and by harmful attitudes that have either grown out of these circumstances or have contributed towards them. For example, the refugee crisis has not only fostered intolerance and mistrust, but was in part exacerbated by fear and a lack of cooperation and political will.

It is difficult to see how Europe will look in the future in terms of the political, economic or social situation. The open letter states: 'Today's Europe is characterised by a lack of vision and hope, and by growing fear.' If these characteristics persist, the future will not be bright. What Europe needs, therefore, is a fresh, or a refreshed, vision. We agree with the emphasis in the open letter on the need for a renewed sense of community. In an increasingly fragmented Europe where countries are feeling the need to protect their own interests more and more and are becoming inward-looking, the sense of community, sharing and participation is receding. A positive vision for Europe will have a renewal of community at its heart.

Throughout Europe's past the Church has had both negative and positive influences, but the values that arise from the Christian faith (for example, equality, freedom, integrity, justice and peace) have been the basis of much that has been achieved for the good. If a renewal of community is to be at the heart of a vision for Europe, we believe it will need to be based on a restoration of these values.

A community of values

We agree with the statement from the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany, quoted in the open letter, that Europe must be 'a community of values'. We regard the values of the kingdom of God as the most appropriate for Europe, and indeed for the whole world. We acknowledge the diversity of cultures, religions and attitudes that exists in Europe and would not want to diminish these – except where they are destructive of human dignity – but would maintain that the values of the kingdom of God can benefit any society. We envisage Europe becoming a community united around these values while embracing legitimate diversity.

Although The Salvation Army affirms the definition of human rights as contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we suggest that the concept of human *dignity* expresses better the Christian understanding of the individual. Human dignity arises from humanity being made 'in the image of God',³ which gives to each individual an intrinsic worth. This view of humanity underlies the command of Jesus to 'love your neighbour as yourself',⁴ and it is this love that, in turn, underlies and gives meaning to the values of the kingdom of God.

Following his statement about loving your neighbour, and in response to the question 'who is my neighbour?' Jesus illustrated his meaning with a parable in which a Samaritan man moved in neighbourly love towards a Jewish man – a man of a different race, religion and culture.⁵ The response of love can be symbolised in the movements of the Samaritan's eyes, heart, feet and hands. First his *eyes* moved towards him (he saw the injured man), then his *heart* was moved for him (he took pity on the man), his *feet* took him towards the man (he crossed the road), and his *hands* moved to help him (he gave practical and financial assistance, and committed himself to supporting the man through his recovery). We are not suggesting that some countries in Europe are 'Good Samaritans' and others are 'foreigners' in need of help. Rather, all of us are 'Samaritans' and all of us need each other's support. The parable illustrates how we are to move towards each other in neighbourly love. We are first of all to 'see' others. That is, we are to understand them – their history, their culture, their religion – and to appreciate their intrinsic worth, no matter how different

³ Genesis 1:27

⁴ Luke 10:27

⁵ Luke 10:30-35

they may be. We are to have compassionate hearts – a sense of empathy or fellow-feeling. Such compassion motivates us to ‘cross the road’ of cultural and national difference and to offer the hand of friendship, support and commitment.

The open letter refers to Europe as a common home. This is a helpful metaphor, but given our emphasis on neighbourly love as the motive underlying common values, we also offer the metaphor of the neighbourhood. This neighbourhood of Europe is a community in which some live together in the same house (EU members) while others live alongside or across the street (non-EU members). All are neighbours and are called to show neighbourly love expressed in the values of the kingdom of God.

Such neighbourly love enables us to express kingdom values as we face the numerous challenges of our times. Neighbourly love will allow us to assess honestly the impact of globalisation – acknowledging both its negative and positive effects. It will encourage political leaders to be more aware of, and to take into account, the views and interests of citizens – and to hold themselves accountable for their words and actions.⁶ It will help Europe to become a neighbourhood of hospitality to people fleeing war and persecution⁷ and a neighbourhood that reaches out to promote peace and development beyond its own borders. It will ensure that sovereignty and subsidiarity do not gain ground at the expense of interdependency, partnership and generosity. It will prompt us to care for the environment of our neighbourhood in order to preserve and improve life for ourselves and for the worldwide community. Neighbours (and housemates) will not always agree, but can continue to communicate with, show respect for, and sometimes compromise with their neighbours. These are just a few examples of how neighbourly love expressed in kingdom values can build a community with a hope-filled future.

The challenge to the churches

This vision of Europe as a neighbourhood of love presents significant challenges to the churches of Europe, both in our engagement with society and in our life together as the people of God.

1. Engagement with society

Neighbourly love expressed in the values of the kingdom of God should be expressed in our service to the poor and marginalised and in our engagement with policy makers on issues of poverty and injustice of all kinds. Neighbourly love should prompt us to support and encourage activities that express kingdom values wherever and by whomever they are carried out – whether by Christian people or not. It should also stir us to challenge situations where such values are being undermined or contradicted. In particular, it will mean challenging the increasingly toxic public and political discourse that creates intolerance, abuse, and even violence.

2. Life together as God’s people

Neighbourly love expressed in the values of the kingdom of God should characterise relationships between Christians in local churches, and between churches of all denominations and traditions from local to global levels. Ecumenism has much to say to the search for a community of values. Indeed, the open letter uses a common ecumenical term,

⁶ ‘The Salvation Army believes that power... should always be exercised so as to promote the values of the Kingdom of God, such as love, justice and mutual respect. It should never be used for manipulation or exploitation.’ (The Salvation Army International Positional Statement: *The Use of Power*, <http://www.salvationarmy.org/isic/ipspower>)

⁷ Leviticus 19:34 commends this kind of neighbourly love: ‘The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt.’

'reconciled diversity', to describe this community. Christians and church communities are bound together by the Holy Spirit in the Body of Christ, so we are more than neighbours – we are brothers and sisters. We are called to make this a visible reality by, worshipping, working and witnessing together while respecting legitimate diversity. The greatest service we can offer a divided and distrusting continent is to grow together and increasingly reveal the kingdom values that create community.

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