

CEC: Ecumenical Perspectives and Challenges

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Introduction

Through the years the CEC logo has gone through a few changes but it has always kept several important features. There's a boat, a mast which is the cross, the boat is on the move and the sea it's sailing on looks choppy, not calm. Over the years from the logo it looks as if the water has got choppy, or perhaps the boat has got stronger, braver, venturing forward into the wind. I'll leave you to decide.

I want us to keep our logo in mind, and let it act as a guide as we think about the story of CEC from a church and ecumenical perspective and some of the challenges we face together now.

Getting into the boat

If we want to sail together, then we all have to get into the same boat.

CEC's story doesn't begin with a boat but it was on a boat The Bornholm in 1964 that the spirit of CEC was truly launched.

Before the boat there had been conversations, meetings and a few early Assemblies. War had raged across our continent, destroying lives, hope, relationships between nations, the structure of society. Surely now the Churches could take a lead in rebuilding friendships and in reaching out to one another. Two ministers Rev Dr Egbert Emmen and Rev Ernst Wilms decided to try to bring European Church leaders together. The necessity grew even stronger as Europe was divided again into East and West. It wasn't an easy task, however they organised a conference in Liselund in Denmark 1957 bringing together church representatives from fifteen European countries and thirty churches. In his opening address Dr Emmen said, "Europe has a duty to seek and show unity, a unity in Christ."

The meetings continued on an informal basis and the number of participants kept growing. As confidence in one another grew they decided that churches needed to deepen their commitment to cooperate in a deeply divided Europe. The first Assembly was held in 1959. In 1962 the delegates agreed to set up a modest structure and put together a Constitution.

Now to the boat. There was an understanding that the Conference should not meet unless there were representatives present from both East and West Europe. Just before the 1964 Assembly however, German Democratic Republic authorities refused delegates permission to apply for the special passports they needed. After a huge amount of effort and diplomacy it was decided to charter a Danish ship the Bornholm

All the participants set sail as far as the international demarcation line between Denmark and Sweden, the delegates from the German Democratic Republic came to meet them and so the Assembly took place on board a ship at sea. The constitution was accepted on Board the boat. CEC officially came into existence.

What is important about the boat?

CEC sets sail and steers us in the direction we have been following for the last 60 years.

CEC is a way of expressing our unity in Christ across our continent.

From the very beginning, CEC has been a means of bringing different ecclesial families from across Europe together and from across political divides.

Early on it was decided that the size of any one church didn't matter. This is different to the World Council of Churches for example, which has a minimum church membership figure. All churches were welcome in CEC, no matter their size and this meant that smaller minority churches were able contribute and participate fully in the wider ecumenical movement.

The boat says something else about unity that is vital. At that moment in 1964 it could all so easily have stopped, become too difficult, too much effort to meet. Instead, we see churches making a deliberate, conscious effort to come together, refusing to let a visa problem stand in the way of expressing unity. There is a realisation that expressing our unity is too important a matter to let go. We live our faith in the political realities of our continent but our unity is not dependant upon that. We answer to a higher authority, the call of Christ to express and live the unity gifted to us. We need to get into the boat together.

The imperative to get into the boat and stay in the boat is still a challenge to us as churches in Europe, as CEC today. Where does our commitment to Christian Unity lie among all the challenges that we face as churches, as Christians, in Europe today? Many, though not all, of our churches face decreasing numbers, stresses on our finances, and a less certain place in our societies. Do our churches still think that there is still value in belonging to CEC and are we able as CEC to articulate that value? Do we still actively want to set sail together?

On board the boat

That leads to another essential question which is why we are in the boat in the first place. The mast of the boat gives us the answer. The boat isn't ours, it is Christ's. Without the mast, the cross and the Holy Spirit, the wind which powers us, we won't sail at all.

If the boat is Christ's then another question arises, which takes us back to our beginnings. Who are our companions in the boat? Who is sailing with us?

We've already noted that CEC brings together three ecclesial families: Anglican, Orthodox, Protestant. Since 1987 that diversity has been given a human face through our Presidency. The challenge to us continues to be to deepen our understanding of one another, to learn to appreciate the richness of our different traditions, and to recognise one another as equal and essential members of the body of Christ.

In the early days of CEC there was much hesitation over whether we should create a specific European ecumenical body when we already belonged to the World Council of Churches. The rationale for that became clear through our circumstances in Europe but CEC was always clear that we worked in cooperation with the WCC. Today many churches ask once again why we need different ecumenical bodies, especially in Europe. This means we face challenging questions such as how we work together more closely with other confessional bodies as well

as the newer organisations such as the Global Christian Forum, which has started holding regional meetings in Europe.

Of course one major ecclesial family is missing from CEC membership; the Roman Catholic Church. Our relations with the Roman Catholic Church has been a theme from the early years of CEC. From the earliest days representatives from the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity attended various Assemblies as observers. When the Council of European Bishops Conferences was created in the late 60s, the opportunity came for building relationships further with CEC. Regular meetings began between CEC and CCEE, resulting in the first major ecumenical meeting in Chantilly in 1978. This led to further meetings and to three Ecumenical Assemblies (Basel 1989, Graz 1997, Sibiu 2007).

The Graz Assembly recommended that a common study document should be developed outlining ecumenical duties and rights. It was to “help the churches distinguish between proselytism and Christian witness, fundamentalism and genuine faithfulness and help shape the relationship between majority and minority churches in an ecumenical spirit.” This turned into the Charta Oecumenica- Guidelines for the Growing Cooperation among the Churches in Europe signed 22nd April 2001. The Charta Oecumenica was widely discussed and adopted by many churches throughout Europe.

Many of the commitments in the Charta Oecumenica are still vital today, for example “to resist any attempt to misuse religion and the church for ethnic or nationalistic purpose “ , “to support church environmental organisations and ecumenical networks in their efforts for the safeguarding of creation “ and in our relationship to other faiths,” declare opposition to all forms of anti-Semitism in the church and to conduct ourselves towards Muslims with respect, recognising the freedom of religion of others and defending their right to practise their faith”. It is a document which is still very relevant. The challenge to us is how to take it forward and renew it together today. The challenge of building up work with CCEE remains.

Lastly when thinking about our companions in the boat, I want to return to a founding principle that size does not matter. From the outset CEC was determined to include minority churches and that is one of the things which makes us distinctive. The question to us remains: Do we embrace that diversity of Christ’s body as well as we should? Is it in name only? The composition, the face of Christ’s body today in Europe is changing. What impact does that have on CEC and on our self-understanding as churches?

A boat on the move

As a student I had a poster on my wall. It was a picture of a boat, setting sail from a harbour, heading to the horizon in the sunset. The text underneath it said
“A ship in a harbour is safe but that is not what it was built for “

As an ecumenical body CEC has often had to change over the years, leave behind familiar harbours and evolve into something new for a different time. 1999 saw the integration of European Ecumenical Commission on Church and Society into CEC, 2013 saw us accept a new Constitution, and reshape our organisation, and after many years of discussion in 2018 we signed an agreement committing CEC to work with and through the Churches Commission on Migrants in Europe.

Over the years our attitudes to the full inclusion of women, youth and lay people have changed. Obviously, because it was obvious in the 1950s, CEC began as a body of male church

leaders, a time when very few of our churches ordained women (though some did) when few had women in any leadership position and young people were expected to be present but silent. A very early CEC Assembly in 1962 recognised women's concerns and youth and lay people as part of the church family. Over a decade later in 1974 however CEC was still mainly a male, clerical body. A group of stewards and young delegates presented a message to the Assembly asking for "open ears" to those not represented, namely women, young and lay people. 'What's new?' I hear some ask. My impression is that inclusion has been a struggle for CEC but we have made progress as a body, just as our member churches themselves have changed, according to what is permissible within each church. We are careful about our balances on the Governing Board and also in making sure that each member is heard and can play an active role. However, our last Assembly showed that there is still work to be done and that we cannot be complacent. We need to make a conscious and deliberate effort to include women, young and lay people fully and not only by being present and involved, but through contributing in ways which means that they too can shape this body, and be fully, actively on board.

Sailing on

The turbulent waters which we sail through aren't only caused by internal changes and developments as an organisation but arise from this continent, where we live and share our faith, represented perhaps by the stars on our sail. Our calling is to one another, to deepen our ecumenical fellowship both as an expression of the unity in Christ we proclaim and also as a witness to our continent, which is continually dividing in new ways. At the same time, we commit ourselves to expressing our faith in action, promoting peace, justice and reconciliation, and raising the Churches voice in Europe and in the European Institutions. Over the years through Assemblies, in different phases of work, through successive General and Executive Secretaries, Commissions, Working Groups, Roadmap. we have committed ourselves, our churches to that witness together. We should never underestimate the importance, the power of that commitment.

I'm glad our logo has us venturing out on to the high seas. The water is not calm, you can tell, the prow is up, and the cross looks as if it is braced against the wind. Nevertheless, our boat is on the move, sailing on in hope and witness.