

Europe – Where Now?
CEC on the way towards the Assembly 2018 and in discussing churches' perspective on future of Europe

Edinburgh, 6-7 April 2017
Conference organised jointly by CEC, ACT and CTBI

Summary and outcomes of the discussion

At the consultation 45 delegates participated from churches in the UK and Ireland and guests from other parts of the continent. Key inputs for the discussion were offered by Bishop Christopher Hill, President of CEC, Heather Roy, General Secretary of Eurodiaconia and the Lord Wallace of Tankerness, former Deputy First Minister of Scotland. The meeting focused in particular on the situation of churches in the UK and Ireland after the UK decision to leave the European Union.

1. Brexit

Discussion of Brexit revealed deep wounds and disappointments among a number of participants, raised a number of questions resonating in the churches and society across the UK and Ireland, and revealed as well differences in evaluating the situation between the churches.

Along with a number of concerns and questions, two principally different positions were presented in outlining the possible next steps after the Brexit vote. One, arguing that the referendum campaign was full of lies and not at all about values. As was highlighted, the discourse of values was never heard in the campaign. Based on these reasons, as it was argued, it would be fair to call for a second referendum. This would not be a re-run of the same thing as before, but an opportunity to explain the issues in a proper way. The question was raised, if churches could support such a proposal? Against this approach an argument that the call for a second referendum would be an act of denial of reality was presented.

In a realistic assessment of the situation it was claimed that the Brexit vote was a logical consequence of an intrinsic scepticism against the EU which was supported in the UK for many years. The analyses of referendum outcomes reveal that for those who voted for Brexit were in particular low skilled people, marginalised and the poorest households, and all those who felt that the system has let them down. The referendum was for them an opportunity to express their negative attitude against London as well as against Brussels. The vote was in particular an expression of the fear of refugees and immigration.

In presenting the views of churches from 4 different nations, England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales the following points were highlighted:

- Churches involvement in the discussion: some churches have been in a position to organise discussions on the consequences of Brexit
- Disappointments and frustration: especially many young people in the UK in looking back on the Brexit vote feel: 'we lost our country'
- Churches in England and Scotland went through different historical experiences shaping their respective positions to continental Europe. The English reformation was determined to be against Europe, on the other hand Scotland very much looked at Europe with much more positive eyes and in following the reformation looked for inspiration from Europe.
- Brexit will a new situation be for churches. The outcome of the referendum is felt as a disappointment not only in the large parts of the UK, but at the same time in Ireland. The result of the referendum will have a major impact on both parts of Ireland. A new border will run through the island. The border, which disappeared in 1998 as a result of an agreement, which was a tremendous relaxation for Irish society, will now again be the subject of discussion. However in Ireland no one wants the border to reappear again.

An intensive sharing led as well to the following questions:

- How should churches talk to those who are pushed by the system to the margins?

- How do churches challenge growing animosity and unfriendly rhetoric in society?
- 56% of Christians in UK voted for Brexit, in England the share was even higher; why is there a gap between the church leadership and people? Why was it so difficult to make a convincing case for church leadership arguing to stay in the EU?
- How should the churches in the UK understand the efforts towards Christian unity vs. the decision of the UK people to leave the European community?
- How should churches react to political issues and peoples' concerns? Not to focus on the issue of power, but how can they use political institutions to work for the common good? How should, in this context, talk be more clearly and more intensively about their diaconal ministry?
- What resources can be used for developing creative thinking on how churches can contribute to the discussion on the future of Europe?

2. Relationship with continental Europe and with CEC

It was argued that the new situation after the Brexit vote calls for new and fresh thinking about the relationship of churches in the UK with European ecumenical organisations, especially with CEC. In the new situation the Church of England will look for opportunities for intensifying its relationship with the Porvoo community, as well as for opportunities to intensify the relationship with the existing Church of England parishes across the continent.

For some participants, the outcome of CEC re-structuring process means that the main focus of CEC is now the facilitation of a political dialogue with the EU. Against such a background the question was raised, if churches from the UK, can after the Brexit, participate at all in such a structure? *'After we are out of Europe, how can we participate in a dialogue in the frame of Article 17?'* The discussion at the same time underlined that CEC is a pan-European organisation having its mandate much broader than the focus on a dialogue with the EU. Bridge building tasks and ecumenical cooperation belong to CEC in the basic aims since CEC existence.

As far as the relationship of CEC to the European project is concerned, although CEC expressed on many occasions its support of the European project, this support has been conditional. There might be in the new situation two reasons for re-opening the discussion on the issue in aiming for more precise qualification:

- The assumption of shared values, on which the EU is constructed, proved not to be as widely shared as originally thought. In reality it has been revealed that there is across the continent a variety in different understanding and interpretation of declared common values, as well as different levels of commitment to their implementation. How can churches contribute to a renewed discussion on values?
- The process of European integration and the construction of the EU has been presented since the inception of the process as a peace and reconciliation project. However, the perception of most of the people at the grassroots level is that the EU is an economic project and manifested in particular through in-transparent bureaucratic machinery, too distant from peoples' needs and peoples' concerns.

These arguments should be taken into consideration in new and fresh thinking inside the churches and inside CEC.

3. Theology

The starting point for Churches and Christian organizations should not be first of all our future engagement with Europe but what is our purpose as Churches, as Christians here on the continent of Europe. It is to proclaim the gospel, to bring about the horizon of God's Kingdom on earth, not any other political doctrine or any other kingdom only God's Kingdom.

Of course we are here on earth, in a world that falls short of God's plans for his creation, and we are commended as Christians to engage in the community, social and political structures we have to bring about even just the horizon of God's Kingdom here on earth. Which is why Europe matters, which is

why as Christians we need to engage in the debate about the future of Europe? If we see ourselves as having the starting point of God's kingdom then it is perhaps easier to develop that vision for Europe and the continent rather than a political construction. The promise of the kingdom of God directs that vision, it infers moral responsibilities, ethical considerations, actions for justice and peace.

Key words that need to shape the response of the churches to the future engagement in Europe are:

- *Confession and Forgiveness*: we need in the church to confess where we did not speak enough about why and how we saw engagement in Europe as important, where we allowed the ridiculous rhetoric of some parts of the media and our democracies to go unchallenged, where we did not try and convince our friends, our families of our view because it was too difficult or we did not want to cause offence, where we did not talk about it in our churches because we were afraid of who might disagree. We must encourage forgiveness and reconciliation between those of different views while still maintaining our hold and commitment to the horizon of God's kingdom here on earth.
- *Power*: Should power be the driving force of Europe in the future? Should we be looking for a Europe that is powerful or a Europe that is peaceful? Within the Christian communities we have an alternative view of power, the power that comes from love, from conviviality. How do we show the power of this love in our relationships in Europe?
- *Participation*: How do we engage people in a debate about the future of Europe? How to progress a participatory democracy? How we in the churches and Christian organizations continue our engagement with partners in Europe? Engagement in Europe should not be about money, rather it should be about sharing our common purpose, that the horizon of God's kingdom, of learning from each other, and yes, combining together in joint advocacy, even if that is towards the EU. We must participate with our brothers and sisters across Europe in addressing the issues that affect our common life in Europe, beyond the political institutions.
- *Identity*: It is true that participation can be hard when identity is challenged. Identity applies both corporately and personally. How do we curate and support the various identities in our communities? How do each of the churches here maintain and develop their national, European and global identities? How do the churches support and sooth those who are confused and worried about their identities?
- *Courage, reciprocity and solidarity*

4. Vision

In looking for its place in a public discourse, the task for churches needs to be to highlight the dignity of the person. Proper use of Christian anthropology and focus on the person is principal. This needs to be employed in developing a vision, which will inspire for a better future. Based on an experience formulated in the biblical texts, a vision inspiring and energising people is of enormous importance. Where there is no vision, we are reminded in the book of Proverbs, people will perish. How can churches based on this experience and in responding to a new context, offer vision which is credible? Churches need to change in the new situation as well.

Church needs to be where people are. Church needs to reach out to people in margins, including the youth. Especially in taking into account the fact that according to the recent European polls 82 % of youth in Europe do not trust mainstream politics.

Participants shared their wish for: *'a church, which is listening to the voice of dispossessed, those on the margins, a church which speaks for justice, a church which speaks for unity, because this is what Jesus wanted so much, a church which does not speak in terms of internal market and a church encouraging the duty of solidarity which leads us to just sharing.'* All this is based on a concept of persons highlighting the relationship. This is essential for developing a concept of a functioning society.

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