



Address by the General Secretary

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At this Council we have opportunities to think about certain aspects of our identity as European and Middle Eastern Baptists. Who are we as Baptists? What makes us distinctive? What do we have to offer to the wider church, and indeed the wider world?

I suspect with over 40 member Unions and Conventions present at this Council there may be at least 40 slightly different answers to that! And that diversity is part of our Baptist identity also.

But various people beginning with Toivo Pilli this morning are going to try to help us with some of the more important aspects of Baptist identity; our view of the church, our understanding of God's mission, our relationship to society and culture, and our Reformation heritage. Though we may have slightly different understandings of those in our own context, these represent some of our core values that we hold together.

Knowing who you are, being secure in yourself and your identity is important. But it is not something that you keep just close to yourself. Baptist identity is not to be used as some kind of a defensive shield against others. But in the security and confidence of who you are you bring our distinctive identity with open hands and hearts. We ask what we can contribute from it to the greater church and the wider society. I happen to believe that as Baptists who value local churches, who believe in the essential separation of church and state, who try to practise radical discipleship and who baptise believers, the missionary baptism of the church, we are well placed to engage with the situation in Europe and the Middle East in the 21st century

I will leave our speakers to develop some of these ideas further. But I want to focus for a few minutes on the identity of the EBF itself. Over the years that I have been General Secretary I have had a lot of time to think about this. Sometimes I am directly asked about it, both from our member Unions and from those who are not Baptists. What is the nature and identity of the EBF, and what values hold us together?

The first thing I want to say is that I think the choice of the word '*Federation*' was deliberate, that is to say that we are different from a Baptist *Union*. Our first Constitution in 1949 begins with these words.

'(The EBF)... is not a super-Union with powers above the national Baptist Unions, but a federation for co-operation between the various European Baptist Unions. The federation fully respects the independence of national Unions and of local churches. The Federation

welcomes the participation of the various missionary societies, boards and committees working regularly in Europe.'

So much for the words of the Constitution. But how did it work out in practice? The first person to act as EBF General Secretary, Dr W O Lewis, put some flesh on these bones when in 1952 he talked about 'Our Unity'. He described what many would see as the heart of our EBF life then and now. He said that it is common life and witness that makes Baptists one. When we meet together to pray and sing a true spirit of togetherness is felt. When we work together, differences melt away. Lewis concluded that the just 'being together' was the most important aspect of meetings of the EBF, with united action to follow.

And so it has proved to be over the past 67 years. Sometimes it has been important to say what the EBF is and what it is not. It is not a super-Union and it is more diverse than any one of its members. We do not agree about everything nor do we do everything together. We come together around a statement of Baptist identity (which is in the back of your Report books) rather than the kind of detailed doctrinal statement that Unions might want to adopt. The Resolutions we adopt at our Council represent those things that we feel we can say together. Over the past years these have covered a range of topics, from a concern for peace in the troubled parts of our region to the nature of Christian marriage.

So, to use the rich word of the Bible, we *covenant* together to do certain things that we can unite around, believing that it is God who has called us together in the EBF. Where we can, we act together, as we have done on the question of refugees over this past year.

What are these things that we believe God is calling us to, and we can agree together to do? They are actually more than we might think!

They include **our shared commitment to evangelism and church planting**. We share a passion to make Jesus known in our region, and to see his church built up and God's Kingdom extended. How good and encouraging it was a few weeks ago to be at the 2nd Mission Forum organised by Ukrainian Baptists in Kiev with the theme, 'Your Kingdom Come'. At a time when their country is still in crisis and dealing with continuing conflict in the Donbass, they nevertheless want to move forward in mission - not just to Ukraine but wherever Ukrainian Baptists are found in diaspora.

In the EBF we come together to express this commitment through our Mission Partnerships programme. Over 200 churches planted in these past years and more being planned now right on the front line of mission in our region. Some of them in places where to be a believer is costly and opens you up to discrimination and persecution. We are so thankful to all those who partner with us in this programme, and to Daniel Trusiewicz who leads it so well.

We also come together as the EBF **to defend religious freedom** not just of ourselves but of others. Because we know that in this we are better together not just with each other but also working with the Baptist World Alliance, bodies like the Conference of European Churches and the European Evangelical Alliance and organisations such as OSCE and the United Nations. We have learned that to be effective in defending religious freedom requires more than writing letters to governments who are not upholding it. There is a whole area of legal and other expertise that we need and Christer Daelander and more recently Shane McNary and Teun van der Leer have taken a lead for us in this area.

We come together around **a shared concern for high standards of theological education in the EBF**. Most Unions would like to have their own school or seminary, but this is often a

struggle, both financially and in terms of accreditation and optimum size. As I travel to certain parts of our region, I see the need for more co-operation between us in theological education, especially with the opportunities to develop online courses, webinars, etc. So I want to suggest that we can perhaps do even more as the EBF to share resources and help one another in this, perhaps through the existing Consortium of European Baptist Theological Schools.

As the EBF we have come together to 'own' and support what is now the International Baptist Theological Study Centre in Amsterdam. You read in my report our relief and thanksgiving that the Prague site is now sold and all efforts can now be put in to develop IBTSC Amsterdam. Our 'ownership;' of this is now through IBTSC itself, and I want to encourage all the Unions here who have not done so to sign up to be members of IBTSC so that together we can play a part in shaping its future. Stuart Blythe and his gifted team at IBTSC are doing a great job and the future looks very promising, developing further the relationship with the Free University of Amsterdam.

And we also come together as the EBF **to help those in practical need**. We have European Baptist Aid as part of the EBF, bringing together partners to co-ordinate response to disasters and human tragedies in our region. Last year as the EBF Council we came together around a Resolution to set up a working group to co-ordinate our EBF response to the refugees situation in Europe and the Middle East. I want to say that the group has worked very well, and has had excellent leadership from Rupen Das and Helle Liht. They will lead a session later in our Council.

I say in my Report that when we came together for our Mission Conference earlier in this year on the theme of our mission to refugees, I have never heard the word 'miracle' spoken so much at an EBF gathering. God's miracles great and small are being seen as our churches engage with refugees who have lost so much and are trying to journey to a better life. Their lives are certainly being changed, not only by the practical help they receive, but also that they are meeting Christ through this experience. What a joy it was for me to preach the first sermon in the new church building in Zahle in Lebanon near to the border with Syria. This is one of those churches changed by the experience of caring for refugees. And during that service there were baptised several people who have come to faith in Christ through the refugee experience.

But our churches are testifying that God is changing them too. Their vision of God's mission and God's Kingdom is being enlarged, evangelism and social concern are being more integrated, and they are discovering that God speaks to them too through the lives of refugees.

These are the some of the things we unite around as this part of God's family in the EBF. We might also mention our Anti-Trafficking group seeking a new direction of its work at the moment. And our conversations together about our younger leaders' programme, TRANSFORM. Through it we seek to help the next generation of leaders among us to be the best they can be in an international setting.

And we add to all that perhaps the most important aspect of all. That is simply **our 'being together'** in our Council and at other times; to deepen our fellowship in Christ, our friendship with one another and learning from another, our prayer for one another especially at difficult times, and our growth in grace together before God. And over the

nearly 20 years I have been involved with the EBF I have seen for myself and experienced in others all these things.

What the EBF is came together for me in the visit just two weeks ago to Turkey along with Rupen Das and Helle Liht. Here are seven small and fragile churches who face many challenges and even opposition and threats against them and their leaders just because they are churches that seek to follow the way of Jesus. Our ten years or so ago we had just one of these churches in our membership led by our brother Ertan Cevik. Ertan is here with us, a courageous and visionary leader, now of the whole Turkish Baptist Alliance. Some years ago EBM International stepped in and now plays a major role in supporting the work of the Alliance. The EBF too has used the resources of its Mission Partnerships programme to help see some of these new churches come into being by God's grace. And in the difficult times there has been much prayer for our brothers and sisters in Turkey.

And Christ is building up his church there. What a joy it was for Helle Liht and myself to step into the waters of the Black Sea at Samsun to participate in the baptism of three Iranian refugees. Earlier we had seen work among Syrian refugees in Adana and Izmir – small churches working with local community leaders to deliver help to those who need it, some living in terrible conditions in improvised camps on waste ground, others who have very basic apartments but not much else. We entered one apartment where the lady had requested a Bible because she said in the situation of being bombed out of their home in Syria and the difficult journey to Turkey, she had experienced the love and care of Christians. Now she wanted to know more about the Christ we serve. There are many stories like this. Turkey is now on the front line of the refugee crisis in Europe and later in the Council we want to invite the EBF family to get behind a special appeal to support the work there.

Nothing speaks louder as to what the identity of the EBF is all about as when we come around our brothers and sister in Turkey, in the Middle East, in Ukraine and anywhere else where to live out the Gospel is challenging and costly.

So finally what are some of those values underpin our life together? You will have your own list but my – admittedly incomplete - list includes:

Solidarity: with one another, 'rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep'

Generosity of giving and of spirit with one another that reflects the generous overflowing love of God for us

Discipleship striving to follow Christ in our region and in our time, and to seek his will and his mind for our life together

Witness Helping each other to live out our passion to make Jesus known in every part of our region, through the witnesses of our churches

Reconciliation Where differences occur, or where our countries are in conflict with one another, committing ourselves to the call to reconciliation from the 'God who was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.

Justice for the poor, the marginalised, the persecuted and the oppressed.

Faith Continually asking ourselves what a biblical faith means in our own time and context; and how it may speak not just to change our lives but to help transform our societies and indeed the whole world.

I end my written Report to the Council by quoting the words of Jesus, that 'by this everyone will know that we are his disciples, if we have love for one another'. This love and unity is a gift of God's Spirit, and we need to nurture it and care for it as something precious indeed. If that is at the heart of all that we do and are, then we can have those more challenging conversations with one another where we might disagree or need to hear a perspective different from our own.

Let's thank God that in a Council like this he uniquely calls us together in one place from so many different places to enjoy a deep fellowship with one another. Let's rejoice in our shared identity as European and Middle Eastern Baptists. And let's ask how this identity that God has entrusted to us can play its part in the building up of God's Kingdom in our region and beyond.

Your Kingdom come, O Lord, your will be done.