

The 14th Assembly of the Conference of European Churches Budapest, 3-8 July 2013

Report by Keith G Jones

Introduction

Over 450 Christians from throughout Europe gathered in Budapest in July for the 14th Assembly of the Conference of European Churches (CEC). Several Baptist Unions are members in their own right, but the EBF Council decided some years ago that EBF should be an associated member in order to act in a representative way for the many Baptist Unions in Europe who are interested in the work of the CEC, but do not seek direct membership.

I was glad to attend the Assembly as the EBF representative.

Baptist Unions represented

The Baptist Union of Great Britain, The Baptist Union of Italy, the Federation of Evangelical Baptists in France, the Uniting Church in Sweden and the Union of Free Evangelical Churches in Germany all had voting delegations.

Other Baptists present included Karin Wiborn (Swedish Ecumenical Council), Ruudi and Haldi Leinus (Estonian Radio 7), Keith Clements (Former CEC General Secretary) and myself representing the EBF.

Several Unions who are members of the CEC did not send delegates – Croatia, Denmark, Georgia and the Euro-Asiatic Federation.

During the course of the Assembly, Baptists present gathered to have lunch together and there was good networking between the Baptist delegates and myself to discuss important issues before the Assembly.

On the Sunday Baptists present divided into two groups to visit two Baptist Churches and participate in worship. Christer Daelander brought greetings from the CEC and BWA to Uji Pest Baptist Church and I brought greetings from the EBF and preached. We had very good interaction with our Hungarian Baptist colleagues.

Theme of the Assembly

The theme was “What are you waiting for?” focused on the call of Christians to Mission. The theme was well presented in worship, a special hymn and in the Assembly logo.

The Uppsala Report of the Revision Working Group

At the 13th Assembly the member churches (approximately 130 Protestant, Free Church, Anglican, Oriental Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox) agreed to establish a Revision Working Group (RWG) to look at the better integration of the Commissions into the CEC, rationalize operations and reduce costs in view of the downturn in income that the CEC had experienced. Here Baptists are on familiar ground with our ecumenical partners. Baptist Graham R Sparkes (BUGB) was a key member of this RWG. Their report, the Uppsala Report, proved to be the focus of the Assembly and discussing the report and a proposed new Constitution for the CEC absorbed the bulk of the plenary sessions and work groups.

From Lyon to Budapest: the work of the CEC and CEC Commissions

A full report of the activity of the total of the CEC since the last Assembly in Lyon was presented. The range of issues addressed is very significant and mirrors so many of the concerns of the EBF and our member bodies. In this report it is not possible to mention all of this work, but I do remind you of some of the significant work areas. These include churches in dialogue (an area where EBF and IBTS have profound interest and involvement, especially in Baptist-Orthodox dialogue), human rights and religious freedom, anti- trafficking, migrants in Europe, minority churches, mission in Europe, addressing issues of church and society and interaction with the various key institutions in Europe – the European Union, Council of Europe, OSCE and the United Nations in Geneva and Vienna.

These reports were not explored in as much detail as many delegates would like, because of the focus on the Uppsala Report, but the work was affirmed and the Policy Reference Group produced proposals to continue the work beyond the 14th CEC Assembly.

Several Baptists have participated in the programmatic work of the CEC and we thank them for their engagement in these key areas.

The Uppsala Report: The Constitution

The focus of the Uppsala Report was on making sure the CEC was firmly owned and directed by the Member Churches. This was the request in Lyon at the 13th Assembly, but is resisted by some of the special interest groups who fear a loss of expertise in the programmatic work. Uppsala also sought to address the finances of CEC which currently has offices in Geneva, Brussels and Strasbourg. The Uppsala report recommended moving out of expensive Geneva and focusing everything in Brussels. However, there was strong pressure from many people to retain an office in Strasbourg. This option finally triumphed. However, the decision was taken to leave Switzerland and concentrate the CEC offices in Brussels.

A key area of the Constitution was membership and the larger churches (Orthodox, Anglican, German Evangelical Churches – EKD) pressed the case for a more ecclesial construct. Many in the related organizations of the CEC were very upset, especially the Ecumenical Youth Movement, but the will of the larger churches prevailed.

One important issuer for the EBF was creating a new form of membership for federations of churches (such as EBF). This is an important issue for us as it means the EBF Council could resolve to become a full voting member of the CEC under the CEC Constitution which operates from 09 July 2013. The issue debated by the larger churches was the concern about double belonging and double voting, which we understand. I pointed out that in the EBF we have 43 member bodies within the current CEC area, of which only five are active members and four seem inactive. This leaves 34 Baptist Unions, at least, whom the EBF might represent if it was a member as a federation. So, special clauses were included that if a federation like EBF wished to be a member of the CEC the statistics setting the number of delegates and subscription would be based on the total numbers of the federation reduced by the numbers from the Churches (Unions) which are active Members in their own right. The Salvation Army, which has a similar issue, and the Baptists worked assiduously to bring this about.

The Governing Board

A new reduced size Governing Board was agreed, with Standing Orders indicating how the Board should be balanced across the CEC regions, by gender and with a concern to include young people. The Board for the time until the next Assembly includes two Baptists – the Reverend Silke Tosche from Germany and Mr Eduard Kibongui Kanza from Italy. This is a much higher percentage of Baptist representation than we have had previously given the reduced size of the Governing Board.

Conclusion

The CEC does very important work which the EBF is very interested in. Now it is possible for the EBF to be a more active participant by having full membership as an ecclesial body. This will make specialists within the EBF much more eligible to serve on Committees, Commissions and Working Groups of the CEC.

For more information about the CEC and the 14th Assembly papers

<http://www.ceceurope.org/>

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