

# European Baptists and the Conference of European Churches

JUST before noon on 8th October 1964, after a long morning of careful discussion of the document, paragraph by paragraph, the concluding question was put. "All those in favour, please raise their hands". Of the 101 delegates present all except two or three (who were to abstain) responded positively. As they did so the conference hall slowly rolled first to one side and then to the other. The chairman and the teller steadied themselves at the table as they stood to survey the vote. Nobody seemed worried by the phenomenon.

What had just been accepted by an almost unanimous vote was the Constitution which was designed to give a semblance, at least, of form and structure to the Conference of European Churches (CEC), the first meeting of which had taken place five-and-a-half years earlier in January 1959 in Denmark. The movement of the meeting hall was not caused, as it were, by a movement of the divine head, whether in assent or dissent. It was simply that a larger wave than usual had passed under the meeting hall just at the moment of the vote. For this CEC assembly—the fourth—was being held on a liner cruising in the waters between Denmark, Norway and Sweden. To charter a ship—the m.v. "Bornholm"—sailing under the Danish flag, to take the whole assembly to sea, and actually to take some twenty-five participants on board on the high sea, had been the only way out of a triangular difficulty over visas, which had arisen at the last moment, and so ensure the participation of delegations from churches in all parts of Europe.

Amongst the 260-odd participants in that Assembly there had been seventeen Baptists from different countries, and seven of these had the right to vote. All these latter voted to adopt the Constitution and thus there was, comparatively speaking, an unusually strong Baptist voice in the constituting of the CEC—the regional ecumenical organisation for Europe. The roots of the CEC reached back to the turbulence and confusion of the end of World War II, they had held fast and developed through the dangerous tensions of the "Cold War" period of the 1950s, and, on this blustery October morning in the Kattegat, a definite shape was given to this developing organism. That is history, of course, and the CEC has grown steadily in significance and effectiveness since that constitutive assembly. But the point is that Baptists have been in on this work since its inception and they have not been there simply to make up the numbers, so to speak.

So the CEC was founded in 1959, constituted in 1964 and has quietly developed into a simple but flourishing ecumenical instrument which, in this year of 1979, both celebrates its twentieth anniversary

and holds its eighth Assembly on Crete in October, with the theme: "Alive to the World in the Power of the Holy Spirit". Now it is very likely that, as you read this, you may well be saying to yourself (we trust, with just a suitable touch of shame for this lamentable lack in your otherwise compendious knowledge), "World Council of Churches I know, and British Council of Churches I know, but 'CEC'—who are you?"

If we say, as we have done above, that the CEC is the regional ecumenical organisation for Europe (the whole of Europe—not just the "Nine", which is often so euphemistically but erroneously called "Europe"), that raises the question as to what is a regional ecumenical organisation. To try to explain this one must recognize that in the ecumenical movement there are macro-, mini-, and micro-situations, with probably a few other degrees interspersed in between. One of the things which became clear during the 1950s, as the work of the World Council of Churches on the world level progressed, was that, whilst there was obviously much work which could only be done at that level, almost each neighbourhood presented an ecumenical situation which required specific handling—and the specific tools to do the job. National and local ecumenical structures were either already in existence or were to be established in very many parts of the world. The problem was the continental or "regional" (for one is here not always dealing with an easily defined and unified landmass) requirements. Thus in the second half of the 1950s the WCC began to aid the formation of these so-called "regional bodies". The first was formed in Asia, the second in Africa. In Europe, the Conference of European Churches *in statu nascendi* offered an obvious starting point, even though the prehistory of the CEC was far longer and more complex than those of either Africa or Asia.

There are now eight regional ecumenical organisations around the world. They are:

- All Africa Conference of Churches
- Christian Conference of Asia
- Middle East Council of Churches
- Pacific Conference of Churches
- UNELAM (Movimiento Pro Unidad Latinoamericana)
- Caribbean Conference of Churches
- Canadian Council of Churches
- National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA.

In North America the Canadian Council of Churches and the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA function as the regional ecumenical organisation. Although all were founded and some are partially maintained by the help of the WCC, they are all completely autonomous, running the kind of programmes specifically required by their region, whilst coordinating these programmes with the WCC and amongst themselves. Thus, to put it negatively, duplication and conflict may be avoided, and to put it positively, beneficial collaboration on different matters may be established. The regional ecumenical

organisations enjoy a special adviser status in the Central Committee and Assembly of the WCC, and use the occasions of such meeting to share together their experiences at the regional level.

At the moment of writing, the CEC has 113 member churches (or denominations, if you prefer) in twenty-six European countries—the notable exception is Albania. Twenty-six of these member churches are not members of the World Council of Churches—an interesting point which implies the possibility of a very broad ecumenical exchange in Europe. Amongst all the regional ecumenical organisations the CEC has the privilege of representing by far the largest number of church members, and of doing so with by far the smallest staff! This is due not to the exceptional efficiency of the European staff, but rather to the exceptional readiness with which European churches provide adequate structures for all other regions of the world whilst, with laudable self-denial, depriving themselves of like blessings!

But now let us come back to the Baptist involvement in all this, and the first thing we have to do is to place Baptist ecumenical involvement in its historical setting in Europe and there have to admit that it takes conviction and courage for Baptists to become active ecumenically in Europe. The strange thing is that in spite of this—or, perhaps, because of this—a number of Baptists hold key positions in ecumenical activity at the national and local levels. In this article we have insufficient space to develop this theme in detail, but a few points may be made almost at haphazard.

First, Baptist history is comparatively brief. In Britain it goes back a few centuries (which already places it in a different situation regarding the other churches), but in most parts of the continent it is only around a century old. In many places you can still talk with people who knew well the “founding fathers”. Second, this means that the act of separation from the other major churches from which the Baptists derived is very much nearer in time than it is in Great Britain, and the wound has by no means always healed yet. As an underlining of this fact one still hears the Baptists referred to as “a sect” in different parts of the continent. Third, as a result, there is sometimes a certain degree of suspicion and mistrust on all sides, which has to be faced and overcome. Fourth, there is the sometimes disturbing vitality of Baptist communities in some parts of Europe which (since Christians, including Baptists, are often surprisingly human in their immediate reactions) may lead to suspicion or even a degree of spiritual envy. One could go on and make the list longer by naming problems of proselytism, ethnic origins and so on. Yet the point is not so much that all these problems exist but rather—and this is the thrilling thing—that there are many Baptists big enough to wrestle with and break through these problems in such a way that they are able to bring a valuable contribution to ecumenical relationships and even occupy positions of high responsibility conferred upon them by churches of other persuasions. This is a matter not for denominational pride, but for warm thanksgiving to God.

European Baptists tell us that they are interested in CEC not only because of their general ecumenical concern, but because in it they find an ethos well adapted to the European situation. Without going into much detail, what could be said of this "CEC ethos"? Perhaps the most important element in it is provided by the fact that the division of membership is virtually equal—half East Europe and half West Europe. This means that the East European members are every bit as much "at home" as those from Western Europe, and this is obviously reflected in the structures of committees, commissions and study groups and in the division of responsibility. The CEC is not a West European organisation with an East European presence to provide some balance and decoration. It is truly European in the broadest sense. Another element is that, because of this broad cohesion and the close participation of East European churches, the CEC treats neither Christians nor churches from that part of the continent as something special, in the sense that the situation in this respect is "normal" in West Europe and "abnormal" in East Europe. That the two situations differ considerably in many material ways is clear to every one. None would attempt to deny the problems and difficulties faced by the brethren striving to be the Church in the socialist states of Eastern Europe. But other problems and difficulties are present in the West, and the fundamental problem, that of being judged no longer necessary by a world whose standards are purely materialistic and secularized, is the same in East and West.

A further element contributing to this ethos is the fact that as many CEC meetings are held in East Europe as in West Europe, and the staff is as much at home in East European countries as in the West. These are such everyday elements in the life of the CEC that one may be forgiven for regretting the all-too-dramatic presentations sometimes encountered in the religious press, including our denominational organ, as though a visit to churches in East Europe called for a degree of intrepidity and an unusually adventurous spirit! Within the work of the CEC we have succeeded in establishing an atmosphere of normality, under differing circumstances, which means that activities can be carried on in an occidental or oriental framework without in the least affecting the tone, or anyone feeling that they are having "to play a part". From this sense of the normality of being together in any given place there derive several other elements important in the contribution of this ethos. First, the East European churches are liberated from the burden of having to be objects of either pity or adulation. They become churches in a given situation, faced with particular problems (just as are churches in every part of the globe), to which they are finding their own answers. They do not need pity. They do not require adulation. They do need to be understood and fully trusted to do their own job—which is to be a part of the body of Jesus Christ in a communist setting. Second, the West European churches are enabled to abandon the role of mentor and to assume the role of those who learn from the insights and discoveries of those living and

working in the East—and there is much of great value to be learned. Third, there is even a difference of vocabulary. For instance, the last use of the phrase “iron curtain” in any CEC document dates from 1960, when it was resolved together that this terminology had no place in a fellowship of Christians whose chief inspiration was the power of the Holy Spirit.

In this atmosphere of fraternity Baptist unions and individual Baptists have played and continue to play a significant part. Amongst the member churches of the CEC are to be found the following Baptist Unions (or the equivalent): Denmark, Federal Republic of Germany, German Democratic Republic, Great Britain and Ireland, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, and the USSR. In addition, good contacts are maintained with the Baptist Unions in Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia and Romania. The Baptist Union of the Netherlands cooperated in the early years of the activity of the CEC, but later felt it necessary to withdraw.

The main body responsible for CEC work between the assemblies is the twenty-two-member Advisory Committee—which is, in fact, much more than “advisory” in character. From 1964 to 1971 the Rev. Irwin Barnes (G.B.) was an active member of that committee. From 1971 to 1974 this responsibility was taken over by the Rev. Arthur Mitzkiewich, one of the best known Baptist leaders from the USSR, and, since 1974, his place has been taken by the Rev. Benjamin Fedichkin, also from Moscow. Baptists from different countries have served on a number of committees or study groups, whilst the Rev. Otmar Schulz (F.R.G.) wrote the official report in German on the fifth Assembly in 1967 and has undertaken a number of other tasks for CEC, and the Rev. Karlo Kjaer (Denmark) was mainly responsible for the practical work on the spot in preparation for the sixth Assembly at Nyborg in Denmark. Even the original design of the symbol of the CEC is the work of a Danish Baptist artist, Mr. Knud Füssel. A few years ago it was modernized, but the basic idea remains the same. Baptists are also in the future plans of the CEC, since Prof. Claus Meister, President of the Baptist Union of Switzerland, will be one of the three main Bible study leaders at the Assembly in Crete in October 1979. Considering the comparative smallness of Baptist membership figures, they have made a very valuable contribution. This should not hide the fact, however, that there is still a certain number of Baptist Unions in Europe which have no contact with the CEC. They would be welcomed into membership, but their abstention simply and justifiably reflects the unresolved tensions existing in Baptist circles (and not only in Baptist circles) on the question of ecumenical involvement.

It is one of the unwritten principles of ecumenical work at all levels that size is not the criterion of engagement, nor smallness a negative judgement of value. So it is with the CEC. It can only produce results advantageous to all if each church makes its contribution from its own confessional standpoint and listens to the contributions which others are trying to make. What Baptists have to contribute depends for its

emphasis upon the specific situation from which the person or union is speaking. But there could be three emphases which all have in common, and which need to be heard in the concert of the confessions. The first is the emphasis on the concept of the church as interrelated and mutually responsible local fellowships, for independence, in the sense of isolation, is a misinterpretation of Baptist practice and history. Built into this concept is also the view of the Church as a flexible structure under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, just as the body is flexible and must be so if it is to be able to accomplish that which the head devises. (But then perhaps there are some Baptist churches which need to reflect, in this light, on their own structures?)

The second emphasis is obviously that of church membership understood as personal commitment. Baptists have the advantage of having the sign of believers' baptism which, amongst other things, publicly marks that commitment. The discussion on baptism must be continued, for let no Baptist assume that he has been able yet to grasp all the truth—or ever will. But it is undeniable that there is no stronger symbolism of commitment to Christ in the life of the Church than the public baptism of a believer.

As a result of this we may deduce the third emphasis, which is that of membership of the church as an experience which demands constant renewal on the basis of a searching of oneself and of ecclesiastical structures, in the light of a Gospel which becomes newly relevant every day. In other words, church membership is not being admitted to an exclusive society, it is the daily experience, together with other believers, of the grace of God at work in the person and in the world.

And what about receiving from other churches? It is difficult to try to begin answering that question, for there is sufficient material to occupy a book, not simply a paragraph or two in an article! Let me just try to indicate three spheres where deep reflection will yield rich fruit. The first would seem to be the real meaning and the positive values of "tradition"—for one can very often hear the phrase "in the Baptist tradition". The second sphere is that of worship or, to use the theological term, liturgy. Baptists are often well aware of the value of music in worship (although, obviously, tastes differ), but what about colour, movement, symbolic action and what about the expression of personal piety in public worship? The third would be the whole sphere of episcopacy, understood as the provision of pastoral care both for the faithful and for the pastors.

Of course, these and so many other questions must be handled by the grace of God at the world level and at the national and local levels. But we in Europe have the inestimable advantage and enormous problem of living in a situation where the Church of Christ has been present in so many forms for two thousand years. The result is innumerable divisions, which is putting it negatively, or great variety of understanding and experience, which is putting it positively. The CEC seeks to be no more and no less than the simple instrument at the disposal of the churches of Europe that they may together use this

richness in those forms of witness and service which God requires of them in the contemporary situation.

One final very small point. The writer of this article, who was kindly given leave by the church in St. Albans of which he was minister to be present at the first assembly of the CEC in January 1959, who became the part-time Executive Secretary of CEC in 1961 and has been its first General Secretary since 1968 is, incidentally, also a Baptist—from South Wales.

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## The Churches and the European Communities

**I**N OUR everyday talk we often refer to Western Europe as the “Common Market”. But the Common Market is only one aspect of European cooperation. By the 1952 Paris Treaty the European Coal and Steel Community was established. The 1958 Rome Treaties set up the European Atomic Energy Community and the European Economic Community (the Common Market). Originally the three Communities had separate Executive Commissions and Councils of Ministers, but since 1967 one Commission and one Council have exercised all the powers formerly vested in their predecessors. This merger of the institutions was but the first step towards a European Community governed by a single treaty. This explains why many people on the Continent speak of “The Community”, but so far that is more a vision than a fact. When the United Kingdom, along with Ireland and Denmark, joined the Communities in 1973, their basic structure remained the same. They continued to work through four institutions—the Council (representatives of the governments of the nine member states), the Commission (thirteen Commissioners each with a specific mandate), the Court of Justice (nine judges) and the European Parliament. Even as I write, discussions are taking place about the ways in which the churches can be involved in parliamentary affairs. We have some idea of how the architects of the Parliament want it to function, but at this stage no one is sure how it will work out in practice. There are those who are determined that it shall have “teeth” and authority. Others are equally determined that it will be just a bureaucratic institution which has a big name, plenty of paper, decisions and officials, but does nothing.

The story of the Churches’ relationship with the Commission and the Council of Europe began with a group of Christian “Eurocrats” in Brussels. They were initially concerned about the Christians who