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# THE BAPTIST QUARTERLY

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### FOCUS EUROPE

B. Green, *Crossing the Boundaries, A History of The European Baptist Federation*, Baptist Historical Society for the European Baptist Federation, 244pp, £12-00

S. Crabbe, *Our Favourite Memories, The European Baptist Federation, 1949-99*, The European Baptist Federation, 192pp.

These two books provide different approaches to the Jubilee of the European Baptist Federation. Crabbe's approach is personal – memories and memoirs from some thirty-five individuals who have occupied leadership roles within the EBF. Clustered around appropriate themes, these are left to speak for themselves with a minimum of editorial comment. Here are to be found the raw materials for the critical

historian to fashion, - testing and evaluating what is said in terms of both author and context, so that the past can be reconstructed, explained and understood.

That task Bernard Green has undertaken in giving a systematic account of all that the EBF has sought to do, from its prehistory within the wider framework of the Baptist World Alliance through to the challenges of the new Europe of the present day. Mr Green's brief was to write a history of the Federation rather than of the member churches that make up the Federation, though clearly the one intrudes upon the other, especially as the Federation championed specific cases where religious liberty seemed to be challenged and engaged with the divisions which occurred in Russia between the *Initiativniki* and the All Union Council over the issue of state registration. Because this is a history of the Federation you will properly find here the record of committees and office holders, structures and programmes, congresses and other meetings, together with accounts of sectional work amongst Women, Men and Youth. Beyond these there is a description of the work of the European Baptist Press Service, and, most importantly, of various diakonal aid functions. Thus the structure of the book divides the material into two parts, the first broadly chronological and the second analytical.

The overall theme is contained within the title: how common Baptist beliefs and commitments have nurtured a confessional family that has been able successfully to cross boundaries of language, culture and political division. The analysis demonstrates that freedom has proved as difficult a commodity to handle as persecution, affluence as challenging as poverty, with discretion as valid a pastoral response to state oppression as valour.

There are also time-specific themes, for the federation was born in the aftermath of the Second World War. Within a dysfunctional economy and a destabilized civil society, the major concerns were relief and reconstruction. These programmes were secured with the help of North American friends and resources, as well as self-help from within the European family. Both church planting and mission within Europe and beyond [through the work of the European Baptist Missionary Society] were high priorities. Focused ambitions sought to extend Baptist witness to countries as dispersed as Iceland and Greece, and later Albania. Alongside this, strategic towns such as Strasbourg and Brussels, which then lacked Baptist witness, were specifically targeted.

Peace witness was especially important during the years of the Cold War, but stands independent of that focus. Together with the need constantly to build bridges across the divides of a fractured Europe, it is a theme that finds equal resonance in both the East and the West and picks up an important strand of Baptist heritage.

Obstacles to Baptist witness were identified as 'sacramental religion' principally of a Catholic kind, and 'state churchism', both Lutheran and Orthodox. In the Latin South, and more especially in Spain, the Roman Catholic Church, before discovering its ecumenical vocation, widely deployed state authority in an attempt to silence all dissent, so that evangelical minorities lived under considerable oppression. In the

East, Orthodoxy, with its historic attachment to the idea of 'canonical territories', found it difficult to come to terms with religious pluralism, in some countries seeing the overthrow of communism as an opportunity to re-establish an Orthodox monopoly. Even in the west the Bundeskirche/Volkskirche mentality of a Lutheran establishment could squeeze out those of free-church convictions from teaching posts and the like. Accordingly the Federation has always had religious freedom on its agenda, arising out of the basic Baptist conviction that 'the State shall not compel men's consciences.' Throughout such struggles diplomacy and protest have been backed up by the fellowship of prayer.

From the beginning, the need to transcend the barriers separating the East from the West was perceived as of the utmost importance, with earnest endeavours to re-establish contact with Russian Baptists. The good offices of Bishop Bell, then chairman of the Executive Committee of the World Council of Churches, were used to good effect in support of imprisoned pastors and church members in Czechoslovakia, demonstrating the importance of ecumenical advocacy at this time. However, the member churches of the Federation have reacted very differently to the ecumenical agenda and the work of the World Council of Churches in particular. The Conference of European Churches, with two of its three General Secretaries British Baptists, has found rather more confidence amongst Baptists, and the EBF is now an associate member.

Another concern of the founding fathers of the EBF was theological education, hence the purchase of the seminary at Ruschlikon with handsome American support even before the Federation came into being. Work at Ruschlikon proved to be at once both costly and strategic. It allowed students from different backgrounds and cultures to come together for theological study, provided seminary facilities for some countries where these did not exist, and for others an institute for advanced theological exploration. It also became the location, amongst other similar initiatives, for the Summer Institute of Theological Education, which tried in a shorter span of time to help East European pastors. In the end the costs of its prestigious Swiss location, coupled with defunding by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1992, led to relocation of its work to Prague with the establishment of the International Baptist Theological Seminary there in 1995, made possible through funds released by the sale of Ruschlikon. The further development of theological education would need to embrace the work of EUROLIT and of the Books and Translations Committee, the work of which some would deem to have been prematurely curtailed. The intricacies of these concerns and negotiations, where consensus was not always easily achieved, are faithfully recorded with great care.

The move of the headquarters of the Federation to Sophia, the establishment of the IBTS in Prague, and the emergence of more Eastern leadership within the Federation, - things hardly possible a decade or so ago - underline the ownership of the Federation by the churches in the East, and indicate a new emphasis as the Federation enters a new millennium and moves on from jubilee towards centenary.