

The Anglican-Lutheran Society Annual General Meeting

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'New Ecumenical Challenges in Europe'

A Presentation by the Fr Heikki Huttunen, General Secretary of the Conference of European Churches

Your Graces, dear friends, thank you for this invitation. Probably one of the ecumenical challenges in Europe is myself, because I'm such a new General Secretary for CEC that I will not be able to answer your questions, I'm afraid, but I'll try to share with you some of my initial thoughts and observations. But, by way of introduction, maybe I should add to Jaakko's introduction that we come from a country where they say you have the most Lutheran Orthodox in the world and the most Orthodox Lutherans! Sometimes it's really true!

For my few observations about the ecumenical situation or events in Europe, I would like to start with a few remarks about the ecumenical movement in general. And I'm thinking of someone who may very well be one of the most important orthodox theologians of the second part of the 20th century, Olivier Clément from France. What he said around the year 2000 was, '*A l'écumisme presque tout a été dit, mais presque rien n'a été fait*'. Almost everything has been said but almost nothing has been done, he said, about ecumenism. And I think that when you think of theological doctrinal ecumenism there is truth to these words, that there is impressive progress in dialogue and discussion in attempting to understand each other, there is something like ground work and research that has been achieved over the last 100 years, but somehow this development has not led to such conclusions as we know it could. And in the Kuala Lumpur meeting of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, around 2005, they used an expression about the ecumenical situation saying that we have 'an interim code of conduct', that we know that something more could be said and done and agreed upon, but we're not just there yet. I'm sure there are other ways of expressing this – positively said it's a state of expectation; if we look at it from a negative point of view there is an ecumenical frustration. But still I don't think it's right to say, as some Church historians have said, that the ecumenical movement was part of the 20th century and it's not so much part of the 21st century. If we see the ecumenical movement as part of the cosmopolitan ideas of the 20th century, the United Nations and this kind of development optimism, then of course we can see that the ecumenical movement is suffering from the same frustrations, the same difficulties as the United Nations, maybe, or as a global view on development, this kind of a hope for more egalitarian development in the world. In that sense the ecumenical movement is part of that sort of ideological period of the 20th century. But when you look more closely to what the ecumenical movement says it is and what are the fundamental motivations for the ecumenical movement, then it's a movement about following Christ, and it's a movement about Christian unity. And that movement is 2000 years old - that is not a movement only of the 20th century. It's not only a political or sociological phenomenon. And I think we have clear signs that, despite this frustration that I mentioned, the ecumenical movement is looking for new expressions. The problem for organisations like CEC is that this fatigue can be very much seen in the international ecumenical organisations.

We do have a problem. We have lost the kind of enthusiasm for ecumenical contacts *per se*. The fact that church leaders from different backgrounds sit together for a cup of coffee is no news any more. It was 50 years ago. Our churches do not see the priority of funding or supporting ecumenical organisations as such. There is this kind of fatigue, or frustration, I would say. There are changes in how the ecumenical structures work in this world. At the same time as the international ecumenical organisations, like CEC or like the WCC, have been weakened in their institutional form, in their funding, etc., many other expressions of ecumenical cooperation are flourishing, and there are new ones coming up because the movement, the ecumenical conviction or quest are there, they have not disappeared, but there is another kind of expression for them. When I was working in the Ecumenical Council of Finland, someone had an intern working for them for three months. They had been asked to list all the ecumenical contacts the Lutheran Church administration had in all the different departments, but the poor intern couldn't finish the task because it was so immense – there were so many ecumenical contacts and forms of cooperation, etc., that every department was having, that the list was endless. That's a good expression of what has been happening in the ecumenical field.

I think I can share with you some not very exact information, but I was just for two days in Geneva, for the first time in a CEC capacity, and I was told that in Geneva they think that they have now seen the bottom in terms of WCC, the funding. They have done a lot of downgrading, a lot of focusing in their work, but now they say that

perhaps the trend has changed – they don't feel they have to do more of that. Now the support, despite the currency crisis they've had with the Swiss franc, which is not intended against the ecumenical movement, I think, so maybe we are seeing new developments also in this area.

One more thing to add. Probably the need for ecumenical co-operation, as I said, is looking for new channels in our different churches and there are interesting signs of that. One sign of this kind of will and interest is the Porvoo Communion. There are some very important ecumenical tasks that have been taken up by the Porvoo Communion, although it's not exactly an ecumenical organisation. But the way they do work is, indeed, ecumenical and so are results they have - for example, there were guidelines for inter-religious contacts from the Porvoo Communion which can be used by any Church. Or, in Germany and Switzerland now, there is a movement of Christian personalities, individuals, who would like to organise a big trans-European event which they call the European Christian Convention, very much in the style of the *Kirchentag* movement, but you should not use that word! But that's another expression – that people have a need, an interest, a will, to do something. But our ecumenical structures that we have don't exactly correspond to these needs, ideas or interests. But I don't think in CEC, for example, we need to be worried about people wanting to organise a big European event, and we don't need to feel, 'Oh, we should be doing that', because we simply don't have any resources for that kind of thing, and we're very welcome to be part of that discussion and to influence that process, so that is our task.

The Conference of European Churches has gone through administrative reform or restructuring, which took a lot of energy and took some time, several years, and it was constitutionally concluded in our General Assembly in Budapest in 2013 and only now are we finalising all the fiscal and legal consequences of that. And now it means that from the beginning of 2015 CEC is one juridical entity based in Belgium. Now we combine two traditions, not quite three, but almost. We've combined the big tradition of EECSC or Church and Society which was always based in Brussels and relating to the European institutions, and also there is an office in Strasbourg, and the second one is the Geneva Ecumenical tradition which in CEC then moved from Geneva into Brussels. These entities have now united and they have formed on juridical and administrative whole. The third one is, of course, the Churches' Commission on Migrants in Europe who are based in the same building as we are and with whom we cooperate daily but who, formally and administratively, are a separate Commission and organisation. We have the mandate of the CEC General Assembly to look for ways to merge with them but this process is still open. We are a very small organisation. CEC has twelve employed persons working with us. Half of them are executive staff and half are administrative. If you take the highest number of CEC employees, we are less than half we were during the great times – if they were great! Somehow they were, of course. I think in the mid-1990s. So we have come down. And now we are starting our preparations for our next General Assembly which will be in two years' time, and we're doing this with the smallest staff for decades now, so we will see how that can happen.

So in CEC we have gone through the administrative reform, restructuring, but we have not yet achieved a kind of psychological change, and that is our task now, how to form one organisation, one team, with these two and almost three different traditions of working and of dealing with issues. So it means we have the office here in Brussels and we do keep the Strasbourg office which is mainly relating to the Council of Europe as some of our staff positions are seconded by member churches so the Strasbourg position is seconded by the Union of Protestant Churches of Alsace Lorraine (EPAL) and the office is also partly funded by the Council of Churches along the Rhine which is twelve Lutheran and Reformed Churches in four countries.

CEC has 114 member churches that identify themselves as Protestant, Anglican and Orthodox – Lutheranism is not separately mentioned – some think it should be! The President is an Anglican Bishop, Bishop Christopher Hill, and our two vice presidents are Metropolitan Emmanuel, an orthodox bishop from France, and Karin Burstrand, Dean in Gothenburg in the Church of Sweden. So this is our organisation and our operation as of now.

The Churches in Europe face a number of new and very big challenges. We think that Europe has a migration or refugee crisis, we say, but I don't know if it's a refugee crisis. If we have 1.5 million refugees in Europe – we don't know exactly how many – but Lebanon has 1.5 million refugees, so if you compare with that, I don't know if it's a crisis. But, what is a crisis is the crisis of solidarity, perhaps, that this refugee situation has inspired, and I think that feels very serious. And, of course, the possibility of Brexit [the forthcoming referendum in the United Kingdom about continued membership of the European Union] is part of this crisis of solidarity in our view. So what is the role of churches in this kind of a situation? Not forgetting that the Conference of European Churches

is larger than the EU anyway so the Church of England won't have to make any changes. We are from Iceland to Armenia. So this question of solidarity and all these wars within Europe is one thing we face.

The other thing is a few years older than the migration situation, and it's the division between north and south. The economic crisis in the south of Europe and the way we have been reacting to it in the north of Europe is another very challenging question. With the migration crisis it's more and more clear that there is already a division among European countries between east and west, or central east and west, a kind of psychological or social and even political difference. And what does that mean? If we look at Europe broader than the EU then we are reminded that we have a war in Europe, in Ukraine. How should that war be called and what is in fact happening there? Are we as churches able to listen to both sides as the CEC tradition would tell us to do? Very challenging questions. We know at the same time that, as a typical post-communist country and a typical central eastern country, Ukraine is very religious – it's one of the most religiously practising countries in Europe. So religion and Christian churches play a role in this conflict, whether they want it or not. How much are we able to do or to understand? Do we talk to all these parties? Actually, we don't. We're trying but this is a very challenging task. We'll see what openings will be possible. Of course, if we mention the war in the Ukraine, we cannot forget that there is a war next door to Europe in Syria. And what about the situation in Libya? These conflicts are, we must say, partly of European making and next door to us, so what should the churches be saying and what should the churches be doing, and how should the churches relate to each other – these are big challenges. But we are, of course, encouraged by the fact that our churches are everywhere; the churches have a network which is global and it is also present in all these countries and we have churches, for example in the migration crisis, who are touched by the fact that their own people are leaving their homelands, like in Syria or Iraq or Turkey. And then we have churches who are receiving them from the sea on the islands – Greece, Malta, Italy, Spain. And we have the churches in the places where these people want to go. They're not interested in staying in the Greek islands. They want to go to Germany, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark. So our churches are everywhere. How are we using this opportunity to listen to everyone and the chance to help all parties to speak with each other?

So, CEC is a small organisation and how we can respond to this situation and all these challenges facing Europe is the other question and I can only refer to our preparations for the next Assembly of CEC which needs to be an assembly of themes and issues, where we gather the work CEC is doing and where we face the questions our churches have and where we provide opportunities for us to share and to listen, and then also to strategise what should be the ecumenical response so these situations where we live. I hope our Assembly can be such an opportunity. We have talked enough about being CEC last time, so now we should not do that – and that is the scope of our work now.