

Report: “Facing Up to Change” (by Barbara Bridge, 01. October 2008)

European Rural Conference held at Altenkirchen, Germany from 1st to 4th September 2008.

The conference brought together people from 19 nations representing churches across the spectrum from Reformed to Orthodox (see appendix). All had a common interest, how the rural churches in their country were coping with change. Over the four days we shared ideas, in a variety of languages, explored the theology of change and made or strengthened friendships across boundaries of language, nationality and churchmanship. This reports can only give a flavour of an event that started with an Alpenhorn, ended with a loving cup of whiskey and produced 20 pages of notes.

Worship

The worship was led by different groups each sharing something of their own traditions. Each morning we were summoned by Alpenhorn to gather and bring the coming day before God in French, German and English. Other languages made an appearance especially in prayer when all prayed in their native tongues. There is a special togetherness in knowing that all in the room are praying the same prayer, the Lord’s Prayer, but the words you hear are unknown. At times we also sang in different languages from a multi-lingual collection of hymns specially prepared for the occasion.

The church in the west

The Scottish group, representing the West, were the first to share their situation. They described a situation which would be well known to us highlighting a changing agricultural scene with prices low and farmers encouraged to diversify into tourism and to seek niche markets for their produce. The churches of the area were also facing challenges we would recognise including an increasing shortage of clergy. In such a rural area the churches give priority to rural churches but even so many interregnums are measured in years rather than months. The Church of Scotland is finding this a particular a challenge with a current vacancy level of over 150 churches seeking ministry. They are responding by increasing lay involvement in both church administration and worship. Lay people are being trained to lead worship and encouraged to take a greater role in pastoral visiting.

The church in Scotland is changing and the churches were having to consider the sort of leadership that was needed to inspire hope. It was illustrated by the story of 2 boats. Is the church to be a luxury ferry where a few do all the work and the rest are pampered passengers or a fishing boat where everyone on board knows and plays their part in making it a successful voyage.

There was concern that at a time of crucial decision making in agriculture and land use, more of the decision makers are people with no faith. They asked how the churches can ensure that secular

leaders hear and respond to the Christian message that the earth is the Lord's and there is plenty for all need if managed wisely.

In the discussion it soon became apparent that a shortage of clergy was unknown in many countries. Both Romania and Hungary suggested a sharing of resources as they have so many in training that they are having to wait for a church when they are ready for ordination. While all churches have their problems we cannot assume they are all the same.

The church in the east

The presentation from Romania started by assuring us that we were really hearing from Middle Europe, the East starts at Lithuania. We saw pictures which showed that Romania is very similar to Switzerland to look at and shares a dependence on tourism for income. The country has 23 minority groups and each has its own distinct culture. The church in Romania is encouraging these minority groups to maintain their distinctiveness and to turn it into an asset. We heard of a project that seeks to support Roma people who have settled in Saxon villages. The buildings in Saxon villages are made in a traditional manner and the settling Roma did not know how to maintain their new homes. By training them the traditional buildings are being restored and the Roma are learning new skills. This is linked with a tourism project encouraging tourist to live in the traditional manner. Once they have repaired their homes the people are keen to restore the church too. While the project is being lead by the Evangelical churches the local churches are mainly orthodox. It has the blessing of the Orthodox Metropolitan and all the churches are growing and thriving in the new spirit of working together.

The church in the Baltic

The focus moved further north and east as we heard from the churches of Lithuania and Latvia. Both churches were suppressed under the Soviet regime. Most of us had some knowledge of that but I hadn't appreciated some of what happened. From a strong church structure before the 1940s there was very little visible by the 1980s. Theological faculties were closed, many clergy were killed or transported and catechism was forbidden. Cathedrals and monasteries were closed. Yet the faith was upheld and passed on from person to person. Churches were active in the freedom campaigns of 1988 to 9. By 2005 when it was safe to declare your religion 79% were Roman Catholic and less than 10% were of no religion. The 54 parishes of the Evangelical church have 20,000 members. The churches, led by their priests, are at the forefront of helping the communities.

The issues they face seemed so familiar. Emigration of young people from the villages is leaving an increasingly aged population. For those who stay there is little work and many turn to alcohol leading to crime. The aftermath of years of atheist propaganda is still felt with some confusion about values leading to a desire for material things. While many are now coming forward for training there is still a shortage of clergy. While the relationship between church and state is now improved it is not yet good and there can be problems with land and buildings.

Before 1940 every rural church had its own land of about 50 acres. The income from that provided

the support for the pastor. The land could not be worked for many years and is now in a poor state. The people have lost the skills to manage small farms during the years when all land was taken into large farms and most have jobs that mean they cannot give the time. The pastor presenting from Latvia had been sent there from his church in Sweden. When he saw the problems his first instinct was to ask his sending church to provide a tractor. But in talking to his people he realised this would not be helpful. No-one could drive it, fuel and spare parts were unavailable and even if they could produce large quantities of excess produce there was no market for such quantities. Instead they needed to rebuild the local networks and support to get the land productive again. He emphasised that before you donate something that you think will solve someone's problems you need to talk to them and find out what they really need. He was going back to celebrate harvest and it will truly be a celebration.

The church in the Baltic has a role to remain an unchanging presence in a rapidly changing world. To remind people that while heaven and earth may go away, the word of God will stand forever.

The role of the European Union

The presentation by a representative of the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches (CEC) reported on the work he does liaising with Brussels. CEC was founded during the cold war to maintain contact between the churches of east and west. It currently has 125 member churches in almost every country of Europe. While they have a headquarters in Geneva shared with the World Council of Churches their greatest presence is in Brussels with an international staff.

He explored the importance of the EU in agriculture. The next budget round is due in 4 years and will be the first since the latest 10 countries joined. The existing arrangements were not changed when they joined but when the new budget comes in in 2013 there will be changes and it is likely to lead to huge controversy. If all countries were to benefit equally at the same level that some do now there would not be enough money and the EU would be financially bankrupt. But the existing countries are unwilling to see their support decrease. France benefits at present and their Presidential elections co-incide with the budget negotiations. It is likely to be a serious issue for them. Already the Lisbon Treaty is causing problems. In times of economic difficulty the solidarity between nations is likely to be severely tested.

He asked how many more countries could be accommodated. While the EU is often criticised European history has shown that only by living and working together can we survive. CEC are producing a paper looking at the issue of food security, now and in the future. Called "Food is Precious" it presents some stark statistics. The world has had to feed 1 billion extra people in the last 15 years. During that time the number who are hungry has stayed at 900m. It is estimated that by 2050 there will be a further 3 billion people on the earth. What will that mean for the numbers who are hungry?

Farmers have responded by increasing yields but this had not resulted in increased incomes. The increased use of edible food for fuel and increased demand for meat are both challenges to be addressed. At the moment half the world's population is dependent on rice but this is a very vulnerable crop, frequently destroyed by disease or flooding.

The move to the cities not just in Europe is producing social issues. How can the churches meet these new challenges? They need to be faithful to their biblical calling while responding appropriately to changing circumstances. He sent us away with questions.

Why should the church pay special attention to agriculture?

Food is not just a commodity but the basis for life. In our sacraments we see Christ in bread and wine. Special attention should be paid to the production of food to make the bread of life a practical reality not just a theological ideal. The church is unique in having contacts both at high level and at grass roots. It is ideally placed to speak with authority and ensure that high politics is relevant to the everyday lives of farm and farmer.

How can the church have an effect? It is less than a year to the elections to the European Parliament. Encourage people in the church to take an active part in the elections, not just by voting but by making sure the candidate are aware of their concerns for the future food security of the world.

The theology of change

Having heard a lot about the changes in the rural areas attention was turned to the process of change itself and the church's role in supporting people experiencing change. Not easy when it is the church itself that is changing. Understanding the journey of change is vital before attempting to help those affected. Conclusions included the need to focus on people, the necessity to keep on leaving old things and trying new ways though with the reassurance that God is with us in change. The church already focuses on people so has an important role to play.

Young people

Young people in the farming industry introduced the effects of a changing agricultural scene on their lives. A local farmer shared his greatest concerns. Climate change is affecting his farm where the swallows left 10 days early this year. He sees a change to a concentration on arable which needs lots of rain. But this is tied up with his second concern which is the threat posed by GM crops. He wasn't against GM in itself but the present way it is handled means that one company, about 10 people, have all the power and appear to be seeking to control the food production of the entire world. He would prefer a more measured approach using selective breeding which is slower but could be just as effective in improving yields.

Two young people from Switzerland explained the different routes they took to become farmers. They are both of farming families and between them took advantage of the different types of training. Both an academic and vocational route are offered and youngsters can follow either path or a mixture. Apprenticeships are offered under farmers who themselves have studied to a Masters level. One who had undertaken such an apprenticeship was keen to go to an Agricultural College so

that he, in turn, could take on apprentices when he had taken over his family farm.

Both talked about the need for diversification and to seek out niche markets which emphasised high quality. While Switzerland is not a member of the EU they are not unaffected by its policies and were keen to trade. One of the challenges facing them is the removal next year of restrictions on milk production. The move to a unregulated free trade was exciting but might cause problems for the less skilled farmers. Both were keen to become farmers but were going into very well aware of the risks. Their pride in their produce, whether it is chocolate, fruit or sunflowers was sufficient motivation to stay in an industry which could not offer them a guaranteed income.

Alternative energy

An afternoon was spent viewing the local countryside and visiting two local projects producing renewable energy. The first was a local factory producing wind turbines. We were the first to visit them on their new, expanded site where we saw, close to, the constructions which are normally only viewed from the bottom of the tower. Close to they are very large and the engineering is impressive to enable them to work with minimal maintenance. Their order books are full for the next 2 years, 400 turbines. There is a growing demand for the technology as they expand into the USA, China and Vietnam.

The second visit was to a dairy farm which has a generator powered by the gases produced from the waste products. Three farms together can produce enough slurry to ensure an adequate supply of gas. In Germany the power companies pay an attractive 16c per kW for surplus electricity sold to the grid. As an avid Archers fan where such a scheme is currently being discussed it was interesting to see how small and unobtrusive both the digester and generator were. Producing green energy need not be a blot on the landscape.

Making sense of it all

Each evening different groups met to discuss the day's presentations in either French, German or English. As my English speaking group consisted of 1 person from each of England, Scotland, Australia, Lithuania and Romania together with a Swede working in Latvia and a man from the Philippines working with migrant workers in the Netherlands I realised once again how being multilingual is taken for granted by many Europeans. Despite the necessity to use their second, third or even fourth language the discussion was informed and lively. Seeing the situation through the eyes of some many different people brings a perspective it is easy to lose when you only consider more local issues.

At the final session the various thoughts were brought together as all considered what they would take away with them. There was agreement that it had proved a valuable time together and we were taking home

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A network. Valuable connections had been made and opportunities explored for mutual benefit

and there was a willingness to ensure the links were maintained.

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Encouragement and challenge. Sharing across barriers of language, churchmanship, gender and race showed how much we had in common and encouraged us all in our shared concern for rural life and the church's place in it. There were challenges but if they could be faced together they were less daunting.

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Ideas. There were many individual ideas to take home. Thoughts about tourism, valuing cultures and local distinctiveness, the value different countries placed on farmers as well as practical information about eco-fuels and

I certainly came away with a renewed hope for the future born of the way in which such diverse people had come together to live and worship together if only for a short time. Rural life is changing and the rate of change is increasing but the church is in the thick of it, a force for good offering encouragement to all who are finding change difficult to handle.

Barbara Bridges, 1st October 2008