

THE CHURCH OF ESTONIA AND THE PORVOO AGREEMENT

The Anglican-Lutheran Conference in Tallinn in September 2005

Peter C Budgell, Vicar of St Anne's, Luton - and the Diocesan "Porvoo desk"

"Has Estonia, in its move from its life of domination by communist atheism to the freedom of secularism moved on further than we have in Britain, where our culture of spirituality is being replaced by the same secularism?" This was the main question left in mind after several days spent in Estonia recently.

The venue of Estonia was deliberate, because it is a boundary country between eastern and western Europe. It itself has to cope with the unofficial boundary of strong Russian influence in the east of its borders and the western two-thirds which is west-orientated. It is also a country that has only for 14 years been liberated from communist control, so the issues of that great boundary are fresh to mind and relevant still to its life. The conference included people from the UK, Ireland, the USA, Germany, Sweden, Finland, the Anglican chaplain from St Petersburg in Russia and Estonia itself.

Estonia: History and Culture

The conference began with an introduction to Estonia, its history and culture. It has a particularly difficult language related to Hungarian and Finnish which makes most in the neighbouring countries unable to understand it. Despite this, the Estonian nation emerged through its common language and history and in the second half of the 19th century national identity re-awakened. At the end of World War 1, Estonia gained its independence, only to lose it in August 1939. After the referendum in 1991, Estonia became a free country, the last Russian soldier leaving in August 1994. Now many more decisions are made in Brussels since it became a member of the EU in 2004; the country has more freedom but also more responsibility. Estonian people are usually reticent to talk about themselves and their history.

The Church in Estonia

The Estonian church is not a state church and so has no interference. Half the population feel positive about the church, though membership of the Evangelical Lutheran Church is about 15%. There is a particular sense of mission towards Siberia. The relationships between Estonian television and the church are interesting, in that in communist times they could not televise services or even show spires of churches. They had to broadcast very exciting programmes on 24th December to stop people going to church! Now about 40 hours a year of first-run Christian broadcasting is permitted, but financing it is a problem.

Rev Dr Randar Tasmuth, the Dean of Theology at the Theological Institute in Tallinn described the changes in people's lives through the recent freedoms. Not everyone however wants to move towards western secularism. There is a boundary between that western secularisation and the Russian atheism, which had been actively promoted.

Religious education is not currently a core part of education in schools, but there are opportunities in some schools these days, and the response is mixed. This issue and matters of ethics and morals are big issues for the Church of Estonia at the moment. Home mission has recently been through music festivals across the country.

Crossing boundaries

The final day of the conference began with a talk about how Jesus Christ crossed boundaries of culture, physical location and jurisdictional boundaries. Then Erik Viström, the Bishop of Porvoo, spoke about the issues of boundaries and Porvoo. An example given was on the issue of apostolic succession. Norway had to break with this 'to be faithful', and yet this has now led to the unity that is now experienced through Porvoo. The current most pressing boundary is Islam, in his opinion. He also highlighted the very important challenge of how we stay together in life when we really disagree with each other. Significantly, the one thing that helped the church in Estonia to cope with the trauma and pain from communist occupation was the signing of the Porvoo Agreement.

Many of us delight in the unity that we experience because of the signing of the Porvoo Agreement. In November 2006 there will be a service at Southwark Cathedral celebrating 10 years since the agreement was signed. For the Church of Estonia, the Agreement is very important, and through the conference in Tallinn we were able to see this for ourselves.