

Linking up with the Conference of European Churches

Helen Hutchison reports on a recent Europe – wide conference challenging churches to join the debate about the future of Europe

“Europe needs a new spiritual vision. Becoming a more vibrant economy is not a vision which inspires people,” according to Georg-Hinrich Hammer, Director of the Friedehorst Foundation, a Bremen disability and rehabilitation research agency. He was speaking in Brussels in November at a conference of church representatives from thirty European countries.*

Dr Hammer called for a new social vision and a common spirit to build up the enlarged European community, arguing that that Europe was disenchanted because people’s cultural and religious identities were under threat, democratic discussion was being stifled by bureaucracy and there was “no collective sense of a European identity.”

Tell us the truth about Europe’s ‘big idea’

Europe, he added, needed a more participative democracy, with a parliament which was closer to the people. He called on MEPs and officials to show greater courage in explaining the truth about the enterprise.

Europe’s ‘big idea’ of raising the less well off to the level of the rest had implications for older member states and this needed to be spelled out.

“We need to understand what integration really means and the consequences of millions of people entering the EU from a much lower economic base.”

Dr Hammer urged the churches to get in the vanguard of these discussions, finding new ways of communicating concern for the Europe-wide problems of chronically sick, unemployed, handicapped, poor and excluded peoples.

Churches must find common ground with other faiths on social justice

This theme was taken up by Archbishop Karl Gustav Hammar of the Lutheran Church of Sweden, calling on churches across Europe to ponder what it means to be powerless and vulnerable and weak. “Can we find common ground for all churches, faiths and religions to walk in solidarity with others in social justice?”

But, he added: “The churches’ contribution to a social Europe must be more than supporting certain priorities on the European social agenda. The contribution needs to be a radical one (in the literal sense of the word of connecting with our roots), going beyond the win-lose of the economic race and emphasising what unites us as human beings. A willingness to share in order to grow together and our common longing for peace and justice is our only security.”

The Archbishop also saw the churches' prophetic role in addressing these issues "from a centre of inner stillness, surrounded by silence" as their very particular contribution to the European debate.

How do churches translate values into political options?

Churches working in partnership with non-government organisations and civil society could have a pivotal role in meeting the needs of those who are excluded from society, according to Anna Diamantopoulou, an MP of the Greek Parliament and a former EU Commissioner for Employment and Social Affairs from 1999-2004.

She described these partnerships working together within a framework provided by each member state and financed by the EU, with a benchmark against which progress could be measured on each exclusion issue.

On unemployment she said that, given the economic downturn and growing competition from China (which produces 2 million undergraduates a year), churches could perhaps help to identify new approaches to meaningful work for those excluded from paid employment.

*** The meeting in Brussels in November 2005 was organised by the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and Eurodiaconia (a network for European church social work agencies). Its aim was to focus on the future of the European project and in particular on the development of a European social model asking: "How do we want to live together as a socially responsible society in the year 2030?"**

**** Helen Hutchison and Alison Smith from the St Albans Europe Group were amongst sixty church representatives from thirty countries attending the meeting. They were joined by UK colleagues from the Methodist Church, Church of Scotland and Care for Europe.**