

Public Issue and Message

Final Report

Christians from across Europe met in Tallinn, Estonia, for the 2023 General Assembly of the Conference of European Churches with the theme: Under God's Blessing – Shaping the Future. The assembly was reminded that to be blessed is to be freed from anxiety about our own security or control – liberated from imprisonment within our own history or narrative. It is this notion of blessing that guides the churches of CEC in their vocation in a conflicted world.

The keynote speakers* reminded the churches that theology is public, that we Christians must embrace the challenge of contributing to an increasingly secularised political discourse. Churches engaged in shaping the future of Europe must be imaginative and brave, confident not arrogant, listening not just speaking, trusting not anxious, hopeful not merely optimistic.

It is because of this vocation that churches, united in Christ and drawn by the biblical witness, are necessarily challenged about developments on European soil. This compels us to face the challenges of a the climate crisis, loss of biodiversity, global migration, rising nationalism under a populist banner, challenges to human rights, broader conflicts and outright war. And all these phenomena feed into and from each other: for example, the eco-crisis damages food sustainability for populations which, as a result of conflict over diminishing access to resources, migrate to seek a better life.

In this context, the assembly recognised its obligation under God to hear the appeal of young people whose future increasingly feels to have been betrayed by those who also were young once. We recognise our corporate responsibility for contributing to the eco-crisis and climate injustice which are tied inextricably with economies that seek limitless growth. God's creation cries out for different priorities.

This assembly has been clear about the following:

- The assembly condemns unequivocally Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine and the devastation of life, territory and international relationships – the violent breakdown of the post-war settlement in which the rule of law was paramount. The assembly heard powerful witness by those directly affected and a strong appeal for prayer and practical accompaniment into the future. The assembly stands alongside victims of violence in this war.
- We are concerned about the role of some churches in promoting this appalling conflict, and regret the impact of this divergence on Christian witness on the continent of Europe.

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- While meeting in Tallinn a new chapter in potential European conflict opened up: nuclear weapons were moved into Belarus where democracy and non-violent resistance itself has been suppressed under the current regime. We deeply regret this move.
- The ongoing blockade of Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijan continues to bring injustice and suffering to people who find themselves oppressed on account of their contested identity and territory.
- Freedom of religion and belief is under serious threat in some parts of Europe - for example, Christian minorities under attack, sacred sites and places of religious heritage being destroyed, and lands being occupied.
- The human cost of global migration, not least on the borders of Europe is enormous. While we met we were shocked to hear that nearly 500 people had drowned off the coast of Greece. CEC and CCME have called for a day of prayer and vigil on 25 June 2023.

Some of these issues are addressed by CEC under the framework of *Pathways to Peace*.

CEC was originally set up to create a space in which Europeans of diverse history, polity and ethnicity could meet together because of and despite differences of perspective and experience. That vocation continues to apply today – especially given current real and violent divisions in Europe. Christians are inevitably united in Christ, enriched by diversity, and are called to witness to that unity in expressing (in word and action) their concern for those without power, who suffer injustice at the hands of others. This also means holding to account all who inflict injustice on others.

As some of the political movements of our age continue to withdraw behind the securities of borders and narrowly-defined identity, Christian churches do not have the luxury of walking apart from each other. Our conversations, rooted in mutual love and grace, must characterize our priorities in the years to come. Churches must heed the call of God in Jesus Christ to be agents of hope, prepared publicly to bear the scars of unjust suffering. This means holding out without fear the reconciling life of resurrection hope in Christ who calls us to take responsibility, under God's blessing, for shaping the future.

* Mrs Sviatlana Tsikhonouskaya (opposition leader in Belarus), Professor Hartmut Rosa (academic sociologist and writer), Dr Rowan Williams (former Archbishop of Canterbury), and the Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew.