



EBF Theology and Education Division

**Symposium „Baptist Churches and Changing Society:
Eastern-European Experience“**

30 September - 2 October 2010, Tartu, Estonia

Polish Baptist and Polish National Identity since 1980

Zbigniew Wierchowski

Political and religious changes

The end of 1989 brought dramatic changes to many of the countries of Eastern Europe which had been under Communist regimes. For a long time, Baptist churches had been hoping for changes in a political system which had been oppressive. In reality it was not easy to change. Communism had held its grip on Poland for about forty years and it had led the whole nation to think in a particular way. The fact that the Catholic Church lost some of its privileged status during the Communist time, led some Baptist leaders to think that their policy should be pro-Communist and anti-Catholic. This proved not to be fruitful, since it was the Catholic Church which earned the respect of the nation and the right to the nation's affections, in its prophetic stance against Communism. Baptists did continue to engage in holistic mission, but the presence of many conservative attitudes, reinforced by persecution, meant that they could not readily reach out to wider society. But the later 1980s had given Baptists hope for change and the 1990s gave them many new opportunities. This period of history was also crucial for Polish Baptists in the process of finding their identity. Did Baptists find out who they were and what kind of role they should play in Polish society? There were important developments as Baptists tried to rise to the new challenges. By the later 1990s, the role played by religion in Poland, specifically the Catholic Church, in the victory over the Communists not only in Poland itself but also in several parts of Central and Eastern Europe was obvious. But on the whole, even during the last days of the Communist regime, the churches in Poland were not preparing themselves for the new world they would face after the regime had collapsed. It took some time for churches to wake up to the full extent to which political, economic and social circumstances in the society had changed. The Catholic Church had achieved a major victory in its long fight against the Communist regime. It also – even more seriously from the Baptist perspective – gave the Catholic Church the right to use a ‘secular arm’ to help ensure the acceptance of her religious practices and beliefs. Political and religious factors were now overlapping and influencing one another. It is true that a proper legal position was granted firstly to the Catholic Church (1989), but legal recognition was subsequently enacted for the Orthodox Church (1991) and then for the Lutheran and

Reformed Churches (1994). The year 1995 brought a legal agreement which covered the Methodists, Baptists, and the Seventh Day Adventist.

Searching for a missional identity

In 1989, as a result of growth over two decades, the Baptist Church in Poland had 6,000 members, 69 pastors, 59 local church congregations and 86 church plants. In the year 1992, there were 320 people, either new converts from outside Baptist life or those brought up within the churches, who were baptized and joined a Baptist congregations. Two years later the number was 326. This was the highest number of recorded baptisms in a single year in the Baptist Union in Poland since the Second World War. From 1992 to 1994, Baptist congregations in Poland baptized 734 people. In 1968-1979, the Baptists had increased in numbers by just 200 members, but recently they achieved the same number in one or two years. It is important to note that at the same time as 734 new members joined Baptist congregations, the churches lost 407 members, with more than 200 of these being excluded from the roll of the membership. Although Poland has seen tremendous change in the past decade, the Christian faith is still very important in the nation, and this has created opportunities for Baptists, who have been searching for their missional identity. Where Baptist churches lacked any vision and plans of their own they adopted what was being offered by the para-church organizations or by friends from abroad, usually Americans. The search for a truly missional identity then ended, in some cases, in the emergence of an identity that could not be authentically missional because it was not sufficiently contextual. There have, however, been opportunities for Baptists to reach out to society. There is the challenge of helping Poland to attach a higher importance on biblical values. New people have been joining churches: a spiritual search is still taking place. One study showed that 51% of people who came to Baptist churches came through individual contacts with and care received from Baptist Christians they met. Only 18% of new people came to belong to Baptist congregations through typical traditional evangelistic meetings. The search for a more missional identity often goes together with a new concept of the church. The type of thinking that might be expressed as 'what has God for me?' started to dominate in Poland in the later 1990s, changing life in Baptist churches. The larger questions about the gospel and culture which were on the minds of some Baptist leaders seemed less important to a younger generation of Baptists. Yet the challenge in Poland (as elsewhere) was to work out what was distinctive within the gospel. Certainly a new generation had problems finding its identity in traditional churches. During the new millennium, Polish Baptists faced the challenge of seeking to engage in mission in a way that was relevant to the changing needs of the people around them, rather than simply pursuing evangelistic programmes that might have worked in previous years. It is not good enough to merely talk about evangelism as a priority. Instead, the churches should place the same emphasis on the care of their people, those who are already in church as well as non-members who are regularly attending. Some pastors understood that if they were going to reach out to people in the wider society they had to find a way to answer the needs of people, which meant engaging pastorally. This engagement, however, was not always facilitated through the churches. These are three aspects of greatest significance in the continued search for identity. The first aspect is a change in the approach to mission and evangelism. By 2010 the Polish Baptist community had found itself with more opportunities for witness over the previous twenty years than in any other period in its history (including the 'golden age' – 1918-1939), but there was still a

lack of confidence in their identity as a Polish denomination reaching Polish society. Secondly, there were internal issues connected with structures, the role of the pastor and approaches to worship that remained points of tension. There was a clear move towards greater self-government by churches, and a lessening of control from the Union Board. Finally, the ecumenical dimension assumed even greater importance. However, the role of religion is not as strong in Polish society as it might seem to be. In the New Millennium time the crisis has also been apparent in evangelical denominations, including Baptist churches. In the year 2000, Baptist membership had grown in the previous thirteen years by only 2.72%. In a study done by the Polish newspaper *Politika* it has been shown that 60% of Poles no longer respect the Decalogue.

Centralization and initiatives

In the Communist era, leaders of the Baptist Church saw no need to start new churches in cities where there was already a Baptist church. In the new climate after 1989, however, new initiatives were taken. A new Baptist church was started in Warsaw, established by an American missionary, Mark Edworthy,¹ who came to Poland with his whole family and received encouragement and help from the Union. This enthusiasm for advance, however, was not shared by all the leaders and members of the existing Baptist church in the city. In his reflection on that time, Edworthy recalls three points being presented to him at a meeting with the elders of the main, established Baptist congregation in Warsaw. Firstly, the view was taken that there was no need to have more than one local church in each Polish city. Secondly, it was put to him that it was not acceptable to start a church in a public place such as a school. And thirdly, it was stated that it was inadvisable that a church should be led by a non-Polish person. Despite these words of discouragement, a second Baptist church was started on 11 December 1994, with 45 people present. This new Baptist congregation had its own identity. Meetings were held in a high school and students of the school were invited to converse in English with people from America and attend basketball games, rock music concerts, and picnics. A remarkable characteristic of the congregation was that the American leader gave his sermons in Polish and he led Polish people in the new, unknown area of evangelism and church planting using a public building. This second Baptist church to be established in Warsaw in the 1990s still continues. From the early 1990s onwards, the Polish Baptist churches started once again to seek to set up bridges to the society by means of education. One of the most important ways in which this was done was through teaching English, for which there was great demand. This was a new activity for the churches but used an old principle – the desire for education – which was adapted to the new sociological and cultural context. Churches opened English language schools all over Poland. The idea of having a connection with society through education was built up over years in Wrocław until finally the establishment of the school was possible. Ruth Kowalczyk (Director of the Language School) summarized her mission this way: ‘The Christian testimony of our school will be expressed by the high quality of our language teaching and this will help the society to go forward.’ Thus the Baptist community opened itself up for those who lived around and this proved to be effective as a testimony to many people in the town.

¹ Missionary of the International Mission Board [IMB] of the Southern Baptist Convention; Director of the Baltic Mission of the IMB.

Partnerships in mission

Poland undoubtedly knew Communism as the Church's 'most powerful opponent'. Freedom from Communism was a significant change, but society also became open to new religious influences. This created new tensions. In the more open society a variety of views could be heard. Some evangelicals from abroad, particularly from the USA, saw Poland as a new field of evangelism, often neglecting to seek to understand the Catholic culture. Many missionaries and evangelists arrived, with different visions of what the churches should be doing. It seems that the time of political change challenged Baptists in Poland to open up to receive – once more – help from abroad. A stronger bridge of partnership between Polish Baptist churches and foreign organizations started to be built in the latter years of the 1980s. As has been seen, Baptists passed on the gifts which were flooding into Poland from other countries. There was a new opportunity, with the freedom that came from 1989, to be involved in holistic mission. Baptist churches as a whole had tended to run their own activities and not be involved in partnership with other organizations in Poland, and some continued with such an attitude. There was nothing in the idea of teamwork to which Baptists could object, but the idea of 'fast tracking' suggests a failure to understand the long-term work needed to plant evangelical churches in the Polish context. Also, it seems that the whole focus was on planting new churches, rather than working with and encouraging existing churches, and at times foreign organizations have seemed to be afraid of allowing their methods to be influenced by national leaders. Often the vision and the plans of these foreign institutions were being forged without reference to the local context. But all the blame for this cannot be placed at the door of the foreign mission organizations. Polish Baptists themselves have shown a lack of initiative in this area. There have also been problems when foreign funds have been used to support local Polish pastors. The difficulties are well expressed by Marsh Moyle (although with reference to the non-European world), who describes how from a 'well meaning mission agency or church in the "West", a pastor receives his salary and sometimes the gift of a car. He speaks the foreign language and does some translation for the mission when they bring guest speakers to the church. In the next village is another pastor who does not speak the [foreign] language and has no Western friends. He does not have a car nor does he get invited to conferences in the West. Jealousy is unavoidable.' A similar scenario is outlined in the book *Mission in the Third Millennium*: 'With the best of intentions - usually accompanied by a lack of cross-cultural understanding, partnerships can collapse or veer very far off course. If the joint ministry is not perceived to be a task among equals, financial and strategic paternalism can emerge, the Westerner is calling the shots – or the less powerful partner can become dependent on the stronger one. Some Christian leaders emigrate to the West, where life is easier. Others remain in their home countries, but the money they receive from the Westerners separates them materially and emotionally from their flocks. To whom are they responsible? Who is footing the bill?' There are, however, several examples of fruitful co-operation that have developed in recent years, especially where missionaries have come from a variety of countries. Mission work led by an Australian pastor Kenneth Hevrenen became known as an example to be followed by other churches. The Foundation 'Elim', was established in 1991 in the Lwówek Śląski, a town in western Poland with a population of about 10,000 people. As a result of cooperative mission a Baptist church was started and this has grown over a period of about fifteen years to a Baptist church with almost 100 members. The work of this congregation is well-known in this town and nearby villages. The members have gained a good reputation for their

actions against unemployment and poverty. The church has focused on meeting the needs of children aged eight to twelve. There is involvement in therapy for children with special needs, and clothes distribution. On five days a week the members serve sixty dinners for poor children. For most of the children this is the only warm meal they have. During the summer time the church organizes Vacation Bible School for almost 400 children. On these occasions, the children bring their parents to the church. The church building, which can seat 180 people, is full each Sunday. This church has developed a clear missional identity in recent years. After 1995 it was possible for Baptists to be appointed to teach religion in schools for the first time. Also, Baptist education could now be affiliated to public education. A qualified Baptist teacher or lecturer could now be a part of the national educational system and he or she was paid accordingly. In the beginning, the Baptists gathered mostly uneducated people. Nowadays the Baptist movement, especially the Polish one, is represented by churches located in big cities and it gathers well-educated members. The pastors are not those who finished their theological course by learning to read, but they are well educated, with degrees from both Polish and foreign universities. Much which was important to the previous generation has changed during the last decades. A number of churches no longer use the traditional Baptist hymnbook, *Glos Wiary*, which had been in use for nearly a century. Whereas Polish Baptist preachers had often dressed in a sober way, some of those leading worship today could even be found wearing shorts. In place of the organ a variety of instruments are now being used during the services. In some services there is no sermon, only singing and music, even if this is an exception rather than a rule. Certainly a changing culture has played a significant part in the evolution of Baptist services in Poland. This has influenced Baptist life, not least through new people joining the churches. As noted, the age of the members is weighted towards those under forty. In the new millennium in particular, as well as those leaving Baptist churches there have been significant numbers of younger people who could not find themselves at home in any of the structures of the most traditional denominational churches in Poland, and some of these have found their way into Baptist churches and have had an influence.

Ecumenism without barriers

The Baptist Church in Poland in the 1990s was part of a growing religious culture in the country. In 1989 there were 42 registered religious denominations. But in only two years this number grew remarkably, to 85 religious groups. In May 1991, as much as 96.1% of Poles identified themselves as Roman Catholic, about 1.8% claimed membership of another denomination, and only 1.3% declared themselves as atheist. After the fall of Communism many new expressions of united Christian witness took place in Poland. One of them was the March for Jesus. This open declaration of Christian faith occurred in many cities across Poland and was supported by different churches. In Warsaw about 10,000 people participated in the March for Jesus in 1990. These first prayer marches after the end of Communism were, without a doubt, a test of mission partnership among churches. New opportunities in evangelization within Poland were also being explored. There were large-scale evangelistic tent meetings in 1994-1995 across the country. Thousands of Poles attended those events, which were organized in partnership with the German Baptists. Another form of contact with people was street evangelism. Here again, partnership was crucial. Both courses in street evangelism and evangelistic brochures were created by the inter-denominational Open Air Campaigners, which had roots in the evangelical world in

Britain. There was increasing interest among Baptists in working through active non-denominational or inter-denominational groups working in the same locality. Every period and every national context in the story of the ecumenical movement has brought its own changes and challenges. In Poland the post-Communist period has been unique in the way churches began to work together. In recent years the activity of evangelical churches has had an increasing influence in Poland in one particular area: more and more Polish people now read the Bible. Ecumenical partnership has been seen in many areas of church activity. Warsaw Baptist Theological Seminary, in Radość, was actively involved in the field of ecumenical development. People from various denominations, including Catholics, Pentecostals and even a Mormon have studied at the Baptist Seminary over the last few years. Baptists in Poland are asking about their role in helping a country like Poland, which has a Catholic-centric world-view, to find new perspectives regarding the role of the Bible and the Holy Spirit. To some extent a new outlook has been coming from within Catholicism, but given the crisis in the Catholic Church there is room for a view from other churches. Future history will show whether the Baptist community in Poland can fashion its identity while still being sensitive to its context in such a way as to help shape twenty-first-century Polish spiritual life.

Literature:

1. Beyer I.Gerald, 'An Ethical Evaluation of Poland's Transition to Capitalism and the Roman Catholic Church's Response', *Religion in Eastern Europe*, vol. XXI, no. 4 (2001).
2. Beyer J. Gerald, 'An ethical evaluation of Poland's transition to capitalism and the Roman Church's Response', *Religion in Eastern Europe*, vol. XXI, no. 4 (August 2001).
3. Bobko Alexander, 'Human Rights and Polish Reality', *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, no. 10 (1998).
4. Fitzgerald Garret, 'Politics, Religion, and Values Within the New Europe', in Grace Davie, Robin Gill and Stephen Platten, eds., *Christian and the Future of Europe*, (Cambridge: Westcott House, 1993).
5. Glasser Arthur, 'Evangelical Missions', in James M. Philips and Robert T. Coote, eds., *Toward the 21st Century in Christian Mission* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1993).
6. Godfried Danneels, 'Faith, the Churches and European Unification', *Christian Values in Europe*, edited by Grace Davie, Robin Gill and Stephen Platten, *Christian and the Future of Europe*, (Cambridge CBS 8 BP: Westcott House, 1993).
7. Haymes B., Goulbourne R. and A.R. Cross, *On Being the Church: Revisioning Baptist Identity* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), p. 88; cf. C.J. Ellis, *Gathering: A Theology and Spirituality of Worship in Free Church Tradition* (London: SCM, 2004).
8. Lewis Christopher, 'Polish Soul – Church planting gets turned upside-down in Poland. Can you dig it?', *Avant*, no. 1 (2006),
9. Luxmoore Jonathan, 'Eastern Europe 1996: a Review of Religious Life in Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland', *Religion, State & Society*, vol. 25, no. 1 (1997).
10. Marva I.Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).
Moyle Marsh, 'The effects of Persecution on Church and Mission in Central and Eastern Europe', in *Papers for a Mission Forum* (Slovakia: SEN 1989).

11. Phillips M. James, Robert Coota, *Toward the 21st Century in Christian Mission*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1993).
 12. Schreier J. Robert, 'Changes in Roman Catholic Attitudes toward Proselytism and Mission', in James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Beuans, eds., *New Directions in Mission & Evangelization*, 2 (New York: Orbis Books, 1994).
 13. Stan Guthrie, *Missions in the Third Millennium* (Waynesboro: Paternoster Press, 2000).
- Wagner L. William, *Eight Growing Baptist Churches in Western Europe* (Columbus, Georgia: Brentwood Christian Press, 1989).