

Evangelism and Social Action – Two Dynamics of Mission in the Practice of the Church
EBF Mission Conference
16 – 19 June 2010, Prague, European Baptist Centre

Report

The Church is fruitful and full of life, if it is engaged in the Mission of God. Whereas, churches which are only concentrated on themselves, become boring and irrelevant. This is the essential message of the EBF Mission Conference in Prague in June. About 30 mission leaders of 22 Baptist Unions in Europe, Middle East and Central Asia showed a high interest and engagement in the lectures, case studies and group discussions. Michael Kisskalt, lecturer in missiology at the Baptist Theological Seminary in Elstal/Berlin, presented two lectures: One about the “Purpose of the Church” (Evangelism, Social involvement and Prophetic Presence), the second about “Evangelism in the Context of Poverty”. He put the stress on the need to act as brothers and sisters to those to whom we feel sent as Christians. Poor people need both our gifts of love in social action and our message of the Gospel by our verbal witness. Kisskalt shared his experiences in his ministries among homeless people in Berlin and among village people in rural Cameroun. In each case, he was not only the one who was giving something but also the one who was receiving something from the poor. In Cameroun he was impressed and even ashamed by their capacity to celebrate feasts in the context of their poverty. In Berlin, he learnt in contact with homeless people whom he baptised that being Christian does not necessarily mean to live in apartments and to live a middle class life.

Ian Bunce, member of the Mission Core Group of the EBF and Head of the Mission Department of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, presented “Crossing Places”, the missionary programme of the British Union (www.baptist.org.uk/resources/crossing_places.html). It offers a range of practical possibilities as to how Christians can cross the ways of non-church people in the society. Christians have to get out of their hidden church corners and move on to the crossroads of their surrounding world. Mission leaders of some eastern European unions did not yet feel this dramatic gap between Baptist churches and their environment, especially in rural areas where Baptist churches are predominating. But in bigger cities, they see similar developments like in Western Europe. In this case, mission programmes like in Great Britain, also proved to be relevant for them.

In the case studies, the participants listened to presentations of some Unions engaged in society by social projects. Georgian Baptists want to be present in the different situations of poverty and war by health services and social services for those who lost their homes in the short and cruel military encounter between Georgia and Russia in summer 2008. “Bread of Life” which began as relief work of Serbian Baptists and other evangelical churches among the Serbian refugees in the 90ies has become a development organisation of high reputation with many different social projects in Serbia. Romanian Baptists in Arad took the orphan children of the state orphanages into their hearts, taking them into Christian houses and families. The Ukrainian Baptist Union, the biggest on the European Continent (130.000 members), suffers the loss of many members emigrating to the West. Nevertheless they are steadily growing, facing especially the challenge of the presence of more and more elderly

people looking for places to stay being aged. In Copenhagen, the Danish Baptists engage in the 'night church' - being present in the streets in certain areas in the capital. Norwegian Baptists are challenged by the thousands of immigrants of Myanmar who are mostly Baptists. Many Burmese Baptist churches have been born and the Union is engaged in effectively integrating these churches. At the excursion to the Russian-speaking Baptist church in Prague, the pastor spoke about the growing network of Russian-speaking Baptist churches in the Czech Republic and beyond. The social ministry these congregations can offer to the Russian immigrants is to offer open ears, time, community and individual help.

Many social projects have in common that the outcome of significant growth of the local churches does not necessarily follow. However, the first motivation of Christians is the compassion of Christ they have for suffering people around them. By that, even many church planters, supported as indigenous missionaries by the EBF, are engaged in social ministries, because the Gospel as word and deed is God's grace for humans in all aspects of their life. Another predominating question was, in which way unions and churches do not only help the victims of injustice, but also live out a prophetic presence in society addressing issues of justice and peace to the governments.

Very moving was the report of the Iraq representatives at the conference. Because of the omnipresent threat by extremist groups, Baptist churches in Bagdad decided to gather only at one safe place for service. Despite the difficulties and the dramatic rate of emigration of Christians, their congregations are growing. The situation in the north of the Iraq (in the Kurdish regions) is more secure.

All participants of the Conference were grateful for the conference. They shared the concern that Baptists in Europe must be present and visible in their societies and bear witness to the Gospel by word and by deed. These are the essential dynamics of the Mission of God which we share. Every church is invited to pray to God that he shows the open door in mission which we have to go through.

The presentations of the Conference can be found at www.ebf.org/resources

The theme of the next EBF Mission Conference is "**Baptist Muslim Encounters**" and it will take place in **Elstal/Berlin** from **7 to 10 June in 2011**.

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