



EBF Theology and Education Division

Symposium “Baptist Churches and Changing Society: West European Experience”

12-13 August 2011, Elstal, Germany

Summary of discussions

Toivo Pilli

Michael Rohde’s opening meditation

Michael read the text Jeremiah 29:1-11. This is a text about God’s people in a changing society. God said to those in exile: „Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile.“ (verse 7). We do not live in exile. Maybe it would be easier if we would live in exile. The prophet said to those who lived in exile: be a part of the society, build houses, marry... Exile in our understanding is hard times, a desert experience, but 90% of those who lived in Babylon did not go back to their homeland. They had good life there. We have historical information about their bank accounts and business contracts that show that they had comparatively high living standard. The Word said, when society prospers, it will affect also you, the people of God. Do we think in the same way? It is not only material or financial matter. If we live in harmony, if society is stable – it will affect also our churches. After exile, the group that moved back to Jerusalem was totally different, we would say even narrow and fundamentalist. They closed their borders, they did not allow their sons and daughters to marry to foreigners. They closed themselves up, and tried to secure their safety. This is why it might be easier if we would live in exile. But this situation is a challenge for us – how we interpret our relationship with the wider society. How to help to develop further both society and the church? If your society prospers, you, too, will prosper.

Discussion after Mattias Neve’s presentation

Are post-Christendom challenges involving only Baptist churches? The tendency is broader. Though there are some growing churches, the tendency is for all churches towards decline in Sweden. The Interact has seen slight growth or – rather – stabilised its statistics. Church planting network has tried to be a forum where churches learn from each other... The problem is that many churches and believers see problems, but there is little action taken that would be based on the knowledge of tendencies in post-Christendom context. -- What is ‘sacralisation’ that was mentioned in the presentation? – There is an increasing interest in post-materialistic value, especially among generation X, in the Nordic societies: search for meaning of life, meaningful experiences etc. But this is far away from traditional context of church or Christian use of language. It is difficult to say how deep this tendency is in the Swedish society. However, there is some reason to think that the phenomenon goes beyond

New Age and esoteric spirituality that was widespread 25 years ago. Is it an interim trend – or more? The search for meaning, at the same time, is blended with consumerism. – Discussion moved to the area of theological training. The traditional theological training: perhaps it should be based on a better awareness of the different gifts in the church, and on the awareness of the changing society, and needs which are related to that, as well as on the ability to read the culture, together with reading the Bible. New meaning of “home mission” – the concept involves now of seeing local culture as a mission field, this is a paradigm shift, if this takes place: more missional approach. However, this is not only intellectual exercise: more challenging is to change our actions and practices based on this shift in understanding. Missionaries in other countries usually need to learn a new language, this sometimes takes many years; we rightly assume that they do not know the new culture. But when training pastors for our own context, we assume that they know the language and culture: but they do not! In Sweden there is a new initiative to teach theology on the level of folk high school, which does not lead to an academic degree, but is more flexible and offers ways to address changes in society in the course of theological education. We admitted during the discussion that partly the way we teach theology and how curriculum is built up is also inherited from Christendom mindset, and this does not always help us to be flexible enough in the changing context. However, this is not to downplay academic excellence, but rather to argue for thinking “out of the box”. The question is that in traditional approach we learn more to interpret the text of the Bible, exegetical skills, but less to be involved in cultural hermeneutics: what does it mean for the context of people who live today next to us.

Discussion after Gunnar Bremer’s presentation

There is a need to define priorities and act upon the priorities in Christian witness. Change in thinking is a slow process. Gunnel Andreasson: „I work in hospital chaplaincy. Different free churches joined together to pay one pastor’s salary, this is an ecumenical cooperation in chaplain ministry. In Sweden it is the churches that pay chaplain’s salary. Now when churches have difficult times economically, they tend to cut first chaplain’s salary. But what do chaplains do? They meet people who have no contact to church whatsoever. They counsel and pray and have conversation with people who would never enter a church, even less a free church. And what we do as churches? We cut a salary of a pastor who stands in the midst of society. This says something about our priorities.“ – Often churches’ decisions and actions want to save the Church, not to serve the Kingdom. In addition, changing thinking or at least the use of language is easier than changing church culture, or practices. Missional talk does not always bring along missional church culture. – Churches are often focused on gaining new members, and are serious about their membership lists, but there are people who want to participate without becoming a committed member. What to do about this situation? – Gunnar Bremer: “Our concern should be more to show what living with Jesus means. Jesus said: Will you follow me? The life of Jesus is so interesting that disciples wanted to follow him. Why we do not invite people to live with us, even if they do not belong to the church? This is communal apologetics not rational apologetics. People will experience change when they can „touch Jesus“ and when the Gospel is made incarnational, tangible.” – The discussion also touched issues related to commitment. If people say, for example: I do commit myself to this church for one year. In this case, how we keep continuity, how we live a life of covenant... We live in a society that does not support people to commit themselves for longer time: but perhaps we need to be counter-cultural here?

Church can be a context where long-term commitments can be learned. However, churches also need to understand younger generation in whose life there is nothing certain, they have a job for one or two years, they do not have their own house, circumstances may require that they move several times... Sometimes people also need to try many things before they find their gift and commitment for a long-term ministry, either paid or voluntary. This “experimenting” should also be favoured instead of condemned. – We also discussed the role of an established local church, in the light of church planting. Does a local church need to last forever? Kingdom will, but local churches probably not. New churches need to be planted. But some dying churches – whose life cycle is reaching an end and can not be transformed into a new start – need to be given right to die gracefully and with dignity. However, problematic is a superficial language that labels traditional worship “dead”, or arrogant attitude that claims only one type – “our type” – of church life lively. – Discussion continued about relationships versus projects and programmes, that was mentioned in the presentation. Relationships – often supported when church members and friends do something together, nor just to have a conversation together. Is project an end in itself, or does it have a supportive function for building up relationships? Gunnar Bremer: If we take away all activities and projects, is there a network of relationships that will remain? Toivo Pilli: Do church members meet each other outside church programmes? Do they call to each other, visit homes or in the hospital, do something together that pastor or church team has not organised? This may be one criteria to evaluate if our church programmes support relationships, or are means in itself.

Discussion after Toivo Pilli’s presentation

Hans Guderian: Talking about Eastern-Western Baptist cultures we need to take into account also wider Eastern Orthodoxy i.e. Greek tradition, not only Russian Orthodoxy; on the other side the Roman church influences for Western spirituality should not be neglected. The deeper roots that define Western Christian background, that set a scene also for Baptists in Western and Eastern part of Europe, go to Byzantine-Rome split, and the consequent trends. Nabil Costa added that there are similarities between the East and West Baptist life and the Middle-East and American Baptist relations. “Our problem is that we interpret differences in culture as spiritual differences. This is how we grew up. Some of these spiritualised cultural differences build unnecessary barriers and cause unnecessary misunderstandings.” There is a need to have more relationships and forums for meeting personally. – Also, we noted that there is a need to reflect upon last 20 years and how East and West relations were affected by post-Communist times. Hans Guderian: „In some way in the Communist times we had even more contacts than today. There are some US groups that have much influence in the former Soviet countries, especially in Russia.” We noted that East European Baptist and wider European Baptist links can be strengthened considerably. Michael Kisskalt: “It is often also a matter of language.” We can encourage some younger people to learn Russian – and to be bridge builders. Gunnel Andreasson: “It is important to go beyond liberal-and-conservative-question. Our contacts ceased or weakened when we emphasised this dichotomy: the West found it difficult to deal with the Eastern ways and did not wanted to be labelled as liberal. We need to find something beyond it.” The discussion touched upon the question if Eastern and Western terminology is helpful and accurate at all. We are experiencing global mass culture among younger generation. Internet does not know East-West differences. We noted that Internet unites, however, in a narrow sector of culture:

music, visual material, Facebook friends. Though many people communicate there is still a small number who actually connect. Nabil Costa: “Something between East and West relations needs to happen not to drift away from each other. We are aware of relationship goals, but we are moving towards our “learning outcome” slowly, but need to continue and move faster.”

Discussion after Nabil Costa’s presentation

Generally: Christianity is rooted in Lebanon, there is an old Christian tradition in the country. However, Baptist movement – as well as evangelical tradition in general – is seen as imported from America. The problem is that in the beginning evangelicals were very judgemental in their attitudes towards other denominations. And the image of narrow judgemental attitude and imported Americanism stick to evangelicals. The platform for relations with wider society is education and social ministries. This is a means how Baptists can be in the midst of people. Evangelicals have founded very good schools in Lebanon. For Baptists in Lebanon, pressures come from different sides: from local cultural Christianity, from different groups abroad, and from Muslims. Evangelicals have an assumption that conversion depends on an individual’s decision – however, there is cultural Christianity that is more community rooted: you grow a Christian in a family or community. There is a contradiction. How to solve this? – Cutting oneself off from cultural Christians is not a solution. Important is to live in the midst of people, only then you can talk to individuals. Education and community services give basis for personal conversations and relationships. Split from society is not healthy at all. Problem is also fragmentation of churches – there are many small churches, groups. Each emphasise ones own identity, instead of evangelicals joining together. Small groups give an impression of being a sect, and are less visible in the society. How to change this image? It is very much a matter of time. Change does not come instantly. Evangelicals should work in improving their own relationships with each other. In Lebanese society it is also important to be exposed to people so that they can see who you are. In this way trust may increase. Lebanese evangelicals also try to bring speakers and key leaders from Africa, instead of bringing them from America. Similar challenge can be noted also in the West: be in the midst of people! Do more cooperation with other Christian bodies! – We also discussed issues related to migration and immigration. Lebanon is getting to be a country that exports human resources: often Christian youth leaves, but in their 50s or 60s they want to come back, often their children do not want to live in Lebanon any more. Reasons for leaving are often economic. Muslims are more rooted in this land. They think with their heart, religion, and sometimes fanaticism guides their decisions – they want to have Lebanon. Christians think about money, they think God is everywhere anyway, you can serve Him everywhere. Muslims are more geographically orientated, the location is important for them.

Discussion after Michael Kisskalt’s presentation

We discussed the position of pastors in ethnic churches who often are elected to leadership without formal preparation and without being officially recognized by any official denomination. What happens to the pastors who work in ethnic churches and have no clearly defined ordination? Are they protected by law, for example, to remain silent in court because of pastoral counseling reasons etc. – Michael Kisskalt: This depends on the officer,

but strictly speaking they are not protected. – There are also ethnic groups within German speaking churches. If these groups grow, for example, some Iranian Christians within German churches – then the local church identity becomes sometimes endangered. If this group grows fast, do we become an Iranian church instead of being German? In addition, very often some of these groups grow fast, if they have a strong and dynamic leader. These leaders often do not have formal education: the established union is sometimes confused. Should we recognize them or what to do? – We also discussed some terminology. Hans Guderian: Term ‘integration’ often means that they have to integrate, they must become as we are... This is synonym to assimilation in this sense. This is too narrow. We must also ask: How local established churches need to change? What kind of change ethnic minority groups suggest to larger Christian bodies? Nabil Costa: “Perhaps term ‘inclusion’ is better, instead of ‘integration’. We as local Christians need also a process of learning from other cultures. Structure of the union needs to be strong, but relationships can be diverse and colourful. Nobody wants to join a weak organisation.” Many of these groups do not appear in German Baptist official meetings or written materials. In an established union the clear structures help to solve problems in a peaceful way, and some of these groups that do not have clear structures sooner or later begin to appreciate this. – We also asked if there are ways to share with wider society the Baptist experience of working with ethnic groups. We noted that there are channels on the regional or local administrative level where Baptists can share their experience of working with ethnic minority groups, but these channels are lacking on a wider national level. Michael Kisskalt: “Perhaps more courage is needed here to offer something on national level.” Short discussion followed defining some areas where Baptist experience could be helpful on national level and could help to shape the society, for example, work with volunteers, emphasis on human rights and religious freedom.