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50th anniversary of the founding of CEC: the second decade 1969-78

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After the crushing of the attempt to develop ‘socialism with a human face’ in Czechoslovakia in 1968 the seventies were largely a decade of stagnation and of the sullen acceptance of the political division of our continent for the foreseeable future.

But the churches could not let the limits of their fellowship be determined by anything other than the Gospel itself; and the CEC’s contribution to the promotion and maintenance of unity consisted of a mixture of open and clandestine meetings and travel by all involved in its work. It is said that ‘love laughs at locksmiths’; and this decade was characterised by ingenious endeavours to part curtains, penetrate walls and circumvent barriers at a time when the resources of modern industrialised states were being deployed to seal one half of Europe off from the other. So every opportunity was used by us in the CEC to meet, to worship together, to bring hope and the simple assurance of not being forgotten, to convey food, clothing and medicine and, above all, the Word of God in Bibles, hymn-books and works of theology. CEC engaged in a truly Pauline ministry, such as we read about in the Acts and Epistles, with Christians travelling from one church to another to encourage one another in the faith, exchange experiences, take up collections, distribute gifts and, above all, enjoy the fellowship – the *koinonia* – of the Holy Spirit. Practically all I know of discipleship and the grace of God I owe to fellow Christians ‘behind the Iron Curtain’ (as we used to say); and I want to pay tribute now to those who kept the faith then in circumstances which are being forgotten and ought to be remembered.

In the forefront of this work was our first Executive, later General, Secretary, Glen Garfield Williams, with his Sergeant Major’s moustache, his Sergeant Major’s voice and, indeed, his Sergeant Major’s past – an unlikely candidate for a career in ecclesiastical diplomacy. It would be easy to caricature and criticise him, but his achievement in securing and retaining the trust of so wide a range of churches and governments was truly remarkable. At the start of this decade he was still not full-time and only at the end did he acquire a colleague, a study secretary, in a move which began the transition from a body, which held frequent Assemblies and had little ongoing work, to one which holds infrequent Assemblies and has the full programme of a Regional Ecumenical Organisation. From his days as Europe Secretary for



Interchurch Aid he established a tradition of care for minority Protestant Churches in Latin Europe, which became a feature of the CEC. For some in the West ecumenism may then have been an optional extra. For the churches in the south and especially for those in Central and Eastern Europe it was a lifeline and oxygen supply combined and the only means for many of engaging in public issues other than by simply supporting the peace policies of the Soviet Union. As Metropolitan, now Patriarch, Kyrill said, ‘The voice of the church returned to our country (Russia) in a roundabout way...by means of resolutions and documents of ecumenical organisations.’ It is worth recording that in the 1970s at least resolutions and documents played their part in the transmission of the Gospel.

So did Dr Williams; and in my most vivid pictorial memory, I see him lying on his bed in a hotel in Engelberg during the 6th Assembly in 1974, having suffered a heart attack, but still following the proceedings in plenary through the headphones provided for interpretation. I thought, ‘Give that Sergeant Major a medal!’

Meanwhile, one of the by-products of the Second Vatican Council was the establishment in 1971 of the Council of Bishops’ Conferences in Europe (CCEE). It is a measure of the confidence, which the CEC enjoyed, that one of the first things the new Council did was to set up a Joint Committee (CEC/CCEE), which has met annually since 1972. It was the mutual trust and affection, which developed there, which enabled the first of the immensely effective Encounters to take place in Chantilly in 1978, Encounters which led in turn to the three European Ecumenical Assemblies and the Carta Ecumenica. We take meetings like these for granted now; then, it was a bold innovation with plenty of opponents on both sides. It was, after all, the first meeting of the churches of Europe at such a high level of representation since the ill-fated Council of Florence in the fifteenth century (1438-45) – a mark of how far we have come in the past fifty years, even if we have not come far enough.

I want to leave you with one last impression or vignette from Engelberg, to highlight both the difficulties and the dynamism of those days

Vatican II had produced a climatic change in relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the other churches in Europe; but that didn’t exclude occasional cold fronts from crossing the Alps, despite the general warming. One such had just occurred; and, at a reception at the Benedictine monastery, which had given its name to the mountain, one delegate abandoned diplomacy and blurted out to the Abbot, ‘How is it that you are being so nice to us?’ There was an embarrassed silence. The Abbot put his fingertips together, smiled and said, ‘The Order is older than any of our divisions.’

Later, when I was the successor of Benedictine priors as Dean, first of Rochester and then of Durham, I remembered his words and took them as a guide to life. In the 1970s, and even more in the 1980s and 90s, we experienced within the CEC the strength of the centrifugal forces, pulling the churches and the peoples of Europe apart; but we also experienced, even more strongly, the strength of the centripetal forces, holding us together. The things we hold in common and which hold us together are older – and stronger - than any of our divisions. That gives us hope.

