

DOC.ID:	PAN1_01
Language:	English
Original:	French
Provisional translation	



Remarks by the President

Jean-Arnold de Clermont

At the Assembly of the Conference of European Churches (CEC), it is customary to ask the President of the Central Committee to present a report. This is why I am speaking to you at the plenary session devoted to the life of CEC from the Trondheim Assembly to this one in Lyon. But I do not want to distract your attention from the reports on CEC's activities presented by the General Secretary, the directors of the Commissions and the Finance Secretary. The Central Committee is of course in complete solidarity with all of these. My own remarks will therefore be of a more personal nature.

Looking back at these last six years of the Central Committee's work, I must surely acknowledge that we have devoted a great deal of time to CEC's structures; one could even say that this has been done to the detriment of other priorities which we have. I shall come back to this. But let us try to see what is at stake here: if we go back to Trondheim, that Assembly gave us, among 43 (!) recommendations for action, that of carrying out the integration of CCME into CEC. We saw very soon that this had less to do with constitutional matters than with our way of understanding what CEC is and our vision of its role in Europe, as well as our way of working. On one hand we all needed to be convinced that the protection of migrants, the rehabilitation of victims of racism, and attention to new forms of slavery, notably that of sex slaves . . . belonged integrally to the common mission of our churches in Europe and their witness with regard to the building up and integration of Europe. I believe I can assure you that this conviction is shared by the Central Committee, and I have no doubt that this Assembly will support the plan to make 2010 the Year of the European Churches for Migrants.

At the same time, however, we have understood very well that a CEC which from now on will have three Commissions would not be the same, at least in the way it works, as the CEC which at Trondheim was still rejoicing that it had integrated with the Ecumenical European Commission on Church and Society (EECCS) in 1999. This is all the more true since, in the follow-up to Trondheim, the Church and Society Commission found itself called upon in many different ways to respond to requests from the churches. It took time for us to be able to express what seemed to us an appropriate model of governance, under the supervision of the General Secretary, working closely together with the directors of the Commissions.

At this Assembly in Lyon, some formal changes to our rules and regulations will be proposed



for your consideration, but the Central Committee is very aware that a more thorough revision of these texts will be needed in the next several years. This is not being done here at this Assembly, however, because the Central Committee felt that the member churches should first focus their attention on the vision of CEC which they share, and then draw the conclusions which this vision will have for the rules and regulations.

An important feature of the journey from Trondheim to Lyon was the European ecumenical stage at Sibiu. The General Secretary's report tells about this. For my part, I should like to underline two aspects. In my opinion, we did not emphasise enough the fact that for the first time we had an EEA of 2500 delegates, representing the largest European ecumenical network ever assembled, and that, despite the imperfections of the Sibiu EEA3, we found ourselves strongly called, all of us together, to a greater commitment to a common witness. This was, in effect, a sort of plebiscite in favour of the *Charta Oecumenica*, and served as a thread running through the entire meeting.

Therefore I believe that now, in the follow-up to Sibiu, we must respond to the ecumenical expectations which were expressed there. That means increased relations with the Roman Catholic Church, so as to have more of a shared witness! I am not so naïve as to think that the ecclesiological and theological tensions which remain between our churches will fade away easily; don't we have such tensions even between CEC member churches? But I am convinced that we have not advanced even half as far along this road as we could do together, within the framework which already unites us theologically and spiritually. So we bear the guilt for not having come further on this road, in a world which has such a crying need for a common witness by Christians. We don't have miraculous solutions for global warming, or for the financial crisis which is shaking our world; we don't have ready-made answers on North-South relations or how to build peace . . . But we do have the capacity to contribute meaning to the debates and actions that concern the future of our world, that is, the preferential option for the poor; the refusal to be fatalistic, reflecting our hope in Christ; and our conviction that "one does not live by bread alone". Our listening together to the word of God, our common prayer, our travel forward on the road of hope are far from having reached the limits imposed by our theological and ecclesiological agreements.

The integration with CCME, the EEA3 at Sibiu, the way in which CEC is structured, and ecumenism have not been the only matters on which the CEC Central Committee has focused; it has also followed attentively the work programmes of the Commissions. Here as well, the reports on CEC activities prepared for this Assembly tell the story. Nevertheless, the question of the role of Central Committee comes up here. I mentioned above the importance of a clear understanding of what holds CEC together, and the structural implications which follow from it; here I want to speak of the questions I have, after six years of experience, about the place of Central Committee in the vision which we have for CEC.

I do not want to preempt the debates which will take place at this Assembly. They will have to do precisely with the vision which we have of CEC, and what should be our priorities during the next few years. But I do want to begin by thanking the numerous member churches which have entered into the process of preparing for the Assembly by expressing,



on the basis of the documents sent to them last December, their expectations of a CEC with a better defined overall mission, centred once again on a few essential goals, calling upon the Commissions to work in greater coherence with one another. This leads inevitably to a reconsideration of the role of Central Committee.

It seems to me that in this perspective, this role consists less of following step by step the work of the Commissions – though plainly this responsibility continues – than to pursue an ongoing task of analysing the situation in Europe, what word the churches should speak to it, and the ecumenical commitment which responds most faithfully to what God expects of the churches. It seems to me that it is Central Committee which is specifically responsible for leading the ecumenical dialogue with a view to a common witness. This is not to be done outside of the concrete commitments which the Commissions carry, but it is to be done before a common witness is undertaken and should correspond to such a witness. To fulfil this task, the diversity of the Central Committee participants is a remarkable treasure, if it is placed at the service of an ever greater knowledge of the situation of the churches and of their witness in Europe.

From this viewpoint, two concrete questions arise:

CEC is, and should continue to be, an ecumenical community of churches in Europe. But the commitment to ecumenism is also carried by a multitude of movements and associations; these are helping to focus media attention on the message of the churches, from which they spring. If Central Committee is to play its full role in coordinating and inspiring this common witness, or at least a witness which takes into account the debate of the churches on their common message, Central Committee will need to cultivate relationships and dialogue with this wealth of potential ecumenical partners. Probably the Commissions can best facilitate this, as soon as they recognize, in their way of working, Central Committee as having the role of coordination and primary expression of the churches' common message.

This brings up my second question on the role of Central Committee: Should it not be, as it has never been before, the place where CEC's communications policy is developed, the place where, from year to year, the choice is made to direct the voice of the churches here or there in the arena of European public opinion? The new CEC Website which was created for the Assembly, and intended as a place for the exchange of ideas, should be used in future as a window through which CEC makes itself visible, makes itself heard, as a common voice for the churches within the public debate. But we shall also need initiatives in many other areas to make the presence of CEC more visible in the European public arena.

Permit me to make a final observation. It is inspired by the European elections we had in June. The massive lack of participation in many countries does not express opposition to the European project, so much as it expresses that the great majority of our fellow citizens do not feel that the European project belongs to them. They do not own it. Europe is a cultural, geographic and human reality . . . but the European Union remains empty of meaning for the majority of its people; it's an affair for specialists. We should not be surprised that the same is true for the members of our churches. They confess that they believe in the church



universal, and they participate in their own churches. But when the churches try to express together their hope and their unity in Christ on the European continent, and in service to all humankind . . . the churches in this role seem far away from people and unfamiliar to them.

So each of our local churches and national churches should be asked the question: does the CEC project really belong to you? do you have an investment, not only financial but also spiritual, in this project which is CEC? Certainly CEC must do the work of making its project plan easier to read, more coherent, perhaps simpler, and better expressed in terms of priorities and commitments which we share. This is the very purpose of our Assembly. But our work together only has meaning if the member churches commit themselves to support the project which we shall define together.

For the ecumenical movement, in which we celebrate together the glory of God, in which we bear common witness to God's word, in which we serve humanity in Christ's name, is probably the most faithful expression of the hope in Christ to which we are called. It is the echo of the hope which God has for our world. CEC needs every one of the churches on our continent to tune this echo closer and closer to the true note.¹

¹ As in music, that means a note that is properly in tune. But it does not need to be strong. Power is not the language of the churches.