

MINISTRY IN EASTERN EUROPE FROM A NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES (USA) PERSPECTIVE

by Paul Wilson

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I recall one of the first experiences I had in Romania at a WCC Roundtable in which representatives of the Reformed Church, the Romanian Orthodox Church, and the Augsburg Confession branch of the Lutheran Church, the Anglican Church, and representatives of the Salvation Army were present. It was one of the first meetings of the ecumenical association of Romanian churches. They were not comfortable naming one of their own to be the moderator, so they depended upon foreigners, because they figured that we were impartial and could provide leadership that would be fair and open. So as the newest one there, I was asked to moderate. I did not think much about it. The meeting took place in a long room in a monastery north of Bucharest, with the WCC's Europe officer sitting next to me. Suddenly the two Orthodox from the seminary and two of the leaders of the Reformed church got into a very heated argument about what had transpired during the Cold War, who had done what to whom, etc. They began talking over each other's voices, shouting at one another, and I looked down the table to the translators who could not keep up with such simultaneous shouting. Then the WCC person nudged me to stop it. I responded, "Well, maybe this kind of discussion needs to find a place to be aired." So I tried to get them to control the speaking, and finally did get each to stop and wait for the other to finish, before they spoke in defense of their position.

Special Contextual Factors Influencing Ecumenism in Eastern Europe

This experience led me to a new understanding of ecumenical relationships in Eastern Europe. It is important to remember the context of the churches as they emerged from a socialist/communist system, and the kinds of forces that they bring to a common ecumenical table. One of them is that in many countries, various churches

were dealt with differently by the government. Those listening to me at CAREE have probably heard this many times, but it became clear to me as I heard people say, ‘we lost all of our leadership, the Communists took all of our leaders and sent them to Siberia, or killed them off; and there were a few of the other leaders who were allowed to continue to have services on Sunday morning, but we were absolutely decimated’. They had deep feelings about that. There were also deep feelings expressed in ecumenical circles about the ways properties were confiscated, and then not returned properly.

One of the recurring debates between ecumenical churches when they really get honest, is the question ‘why have you not supported our petition to have a church returned?’ or ‘how can you continue to use those properties that the government gave you, instead of turning them back to us, you knew that they were ours for forty years’. That is the kind of context in which one must view any effort on the part of the churches and its leadership to come together around a common table.

Recently a book appeared in German, entitled *Nationalism and Protestantism: The Activities of the Churches During the Cold War*. It is a part of the ongoing debate in Europe regarding allegations that the ecumenical movement did or did not support dissidents who were in prison, or that the WCC or the ecumenical movement was infiltrated. The book alleges that those who had positions of power and influence in the churches under the Communists were obviously either duped by the Communists, or were agents of the Communists; therefore now that all are free, “they should be swept out of office and we should be restored to our rightful positions of leadership within the church”. This is a very real issue, as more and more of the secret service files are becoming available to the public. Those files are being scrutinized by persons who feel that they have a legitimate grievance that must be addressed now that freedom is a reality in places like East Germany.

The fourth section of this book deals with the ecumenical movement in the United States. Did we compromise our positions in ecumenical gatherings, in order to make it more comfortable or possible for our friends from behind the Iron Curtain to participate? Were we infiltrated by the CIA or did we deal with people who had been compromised with their own secret police? There are a lot of files that have been

opened, that contain the names of well known church leaders, even persons like Metropolitan Nikodim and others, who have nicknames listed beside their names by the secret police (codenames), but that does not necessarily mean that they ever did much more than were interviewed by an agent of the secret police, or even that the secret police official may have wanted to elevate his own importance in the eyes of his superiors, so he reported that he had had important conversations with these church leaders, and it all gets in the file. The person who is the primary target never hears this until suddenly it becomes public. So this is part of the context that we are in during this transition period. We continue within the USA to get as much information as possible, and hope that in the future we can clarify the record of the ecumenical movement as it defended those who were victims under the communist regimes. We can certainly clarify what we did do, which was probably not enough, but we did do something.

Something that came to my attention in the autumn of 1999 is that with globalization, the churches in the East are increasingly being bombarded by the economics, the political system and the culture from the West. For many, the ecumenical movement is a manifestation of that Western globalization and culture, and they reject it. Sometimes they feel that the ecumenical movement is a top down influence in their lives and churches. They feel that not enough time and effort has been spent building the grass roots of an ecumenical movement that is grounded in common activities and growing out of their concerns. They do not want something that is planted upon them from the outside. I was reminded of this when there was a report of a conference that took place in Moscow between the Orthodox Church and the Muslim Community in which all things Western were paint-brushed as “evil” and as source of all that is wrong in society. Suddenly it becomes clear that globalization is having an impact.

Another matter of import has been the issue of NATO, the regional alliance and its armed intervention in Kosovo. When I was traveling in Romania about three years ago, everyone was excited because they wanted to be one of the first countries included in the expansion of NATO. In fact when they did not get named in the first three, church leaders came to me and asked ‘why did you not work harder for us to be

included in NATO'? So I said, "You don't really want to be in NATO," but they said, "Yes we do want to be in NATO." They were very enthusiastic about their voting, their agenda in national life in order to accomplish such membership, because they thought it was going to be a good thing for them. Then NATO intervened in Kosovo, and the next time I visited, the leader of a nunnery, an older woman, said to me, that she believed that the whole intervention in Kosovo by NATO was the western war against Orthodoxy. I am reporting this as an example of how the issues of war and peace also have had a detrimental impact on the struggle of the churches in Eastern Europe to come together, to act together and to be together.

Pan-European Efforts at Ecumenism

Let me turn to some of the pan-European efforts at ecumenism. As a Europe Committee of NCC we just spent a whole day discussing the *Charta Oecumenica*, a document that has been written by the Conference of European Churches (CEC) and the European Conference of Catholic Bishops. It contains some real problems as we looked at its content, but it represents an ongoing activity after Graz and Basel of Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox and Anglican churches across Europe to attempt to be together and to frame a basis of understanding for their future activities together. I would say that as I talk with members of the CEC staff, they are very realistic about the fact that their colleagues in the Catholic Church could at any moment be pulled back from such understandings. They are concerned about how far Catholic bishops are willing to go or are able to go. Some of the activities going on at CEC involve Catholic orders and Catholic organizations, but not necessarily the officialdom of the Roman Catholic Church. So this document provides a wonderful opportunity for Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic not just to have conversations at the highest level, but to move one step down and have conversations with organizations on issues of migration, the environment, etc. Also, the ecumenical charter will be discussed, a joint discussion. It will be revised after such discussions across Europe and is expected to be approved early in the year 2001. It does indeed represent a fairly significant step in that direction.

I was just looking at an interview with Keith Clements, secretary general of CEC (in *Ecumenical News International*) in which he talks about the relationship between the Catholic Churches in Europe and CEC. When asked whether the Catholic Church will become a member of CEC, Clements, a Baptist, said that there had not been any real movement on that issue, “the churches have not approached us so we have not had to deal with it”. There has been no request from the Roman Catholic Church to join CEC, but some members are quite concerned about a church that large joining CEC and what that would mean. Clements said he was convinced that ultimately there would be one ecumenical structure for Europe, which would be fully inclusive of all church traditions. Now he did not say when that would happen, but he is of the opinion that it is a possibility and may indeed happen. Some of the Catholic commissions that CEC works with include the International Catholic Commission for Migrants, the establishing of a SouthEast Europe Center for Reconciliation with the justice and peace network of the Catholic Church, the European Conciliation Commission and the development of the Ecumenical Charter. One must also remember that CAREE was very instrumental in helping bring about the conferences held in Russia and Hungary on Christian Faith and Human Enmity, and there is still in Russia a continuation committee that is operative, or rather has been revived.

National Roundtable Programs

With reference to the grass roots, and what we have been attempting to do in the NCC Europe Committee in relief, development, emergency response, and refugee work across Europe, the focus has been not just to reach out to the most vulnerable, but also to find ways to see that ecumenical formation is a part of our activities and program as a goal, not just a byproduct. Let me mention some of the WCC Roundtables. These are creations of the World Council of Churches, in some cases in cooperation with CEC, in Eastern Europe, to bring together the churches within a country, and aid agencies from the West to support the work of the churches. The genius of the idea is that churches are asked to organize themselves at least to the point of being able to receive and evaluate proposals for projects that are brought to

them, to make a priority list of projects and programs, and in many cases build a staff and structure to serve the roundtable on behalf of the churches. One of the stronger ones is the ecumenical association of churches in Romania called AidRom. It is a coming together of the Orthodox Churches, the Reformed Churches (both conferences), the Lutheran Church, the Salvation Army, the Anglican and Armenian Churches in Romania, but not the Catholics. AidRom has a large staff doing a variety of social services and diaconical ministries.

AidRom continues to deal with the issue of 'are we a council of churches' and at some points they say "yes we are and we ought to think about the kind of structure that would require" beyond the diaconical work they are doing. The genius of it is that they come together because it is in their interest, as they mutually benefit from the possibility of projects and programs. They have training programs in which they are training local people in congregations, but a lot of it is done ecumenically and the heads of the churches now sit at the table. Now the moderators are from the Romanian Church including Bishop Klein from the Lutherans and Bishop Nifon from the Orthodox Church who is the president of AidRom. Everyone accepts that. For me that is a growth in ecumenical understanding and of being in conversation. It is wonderful to watch Klein, Nifon and Tokeš, though not so much the Reformed Church leaders, walking during breaks and considering how to deal with issues.

In Armenia the Roundtable with a staff of three or four are headquartered in Etchmiadzin, in the headquarters of the Armenian Orthodox Church. But it brings together not only the Orthodox Church, but also the Evangelical churches, the Methodist Churches and their work, and the Catholic Churches. They are not talking about a council of churches, but are talking about cooperating and working together, developing priorities for serving the most vulnerable in that community.

When the Georgian churches voted to withdraw from CEC and WCC, it was a real question of how we would continue the work in Georgia, but we actually increased the work there, such as supporting the blanket project. Money is raised to purchase wool, then refugees and displaced women sew the covers and a staff member is responsible for distributing the blankets. The project has grown to nearly \$300,000, operative in eastern and western Georgia. This blanket fund continued even after they voted to leave CEC and WCC. That roundtable process is primarily Orthodox, with International Orthodox Christian Charity as a crucial and helpful partner, but the Methodist churches through United Methodist Committee on Relief are now involved in the roundtable process.

In the Belarus roundtable are the Orthodox, the Evangelical Christian Baptists and the Lutherans with the Catholic Churches as observers. These are really initial efforts to try to develop relationships and to bring together churches that have not had an opportunity for that. So we hope that ecumenical formation and relationships will be nurtured and develop from the ground up.

There are several other kinds of ongoing efforts from this side. We have tried everywhere that emergencies occur, to utilize churches and ecumenical structures in the delivery of humanitarian relief. Recently, Church World Service appealed, received funds and are helping in the training of preparedness for disasters, in order to strengthen the capacity of the churches themselves to respond. These experiences may enable churches who have not had the opportunity, to come together in community with one another; who have not had the opportunity to experience pluralism to discover its gifts. Ecumenism that grows in their soil may look a little different than in Western modes, but it can be just as sweet.