

Report on the European Rural Conference "Facing into Change"

Held 1st -4th September 2008 at the Evangelische Landjugendakademie in Altenkirchen, Germany

40 delegates of the Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant Churches, representing 19 different countries, attended the Conference.

Monday 1st September

The conference began with worship led by the Swiss group. We were summoned to worship by the alpenhorn. The group led us in a celebration of our many languages, and included items in everything from Hebrew to Finnish.

Eberhard Cherdron, the President of the Evangelische Kirche der Pfalz, welcomed the conference. He explained to the participants that the place where the meeting was taking place was the centre of the rural thinking for the church nationally, and he was especially pleased to welcome the conference in the 50th anniversary of the centre's creation. He outlined the current focus for the church in Germany, namely the importance of Church buildings and other church institutions such as school and social care. He spoke of the challenges being faced as numbers decline especially in rural areas, and the importance of worship and being alongside people in their moments of crisis. He expressed his hopes that the next few days would be the start of something important.

Dieter Sonnentag then introduced the group to the place of the Evangelische Landjugendakademie, explaining that it belongs to the national church and is funded partly from grants from the church and the government. 6,500 people visit the centre each year and despite its title it does not only focus on young people. It exists to train and educate church workers and others.

He then invited all the participants to fill out a short form answering a few key questions about themselves. This would be posted on the wall with photos to help people meet and learn about each other. He then asked people to start the process of meeting each other, initially in pairs and then with pairs joining up to 4s and latterly into groups of 8.

Later Dieter led a session of "cultural conjuring"

Tuesday 2nd September

The Romanian and Hungarian group led the Morning Worship.

Andrew Bowden introduced the start of the work of the conference by sharing the rationale of the planning group. They had wanted to allow people to share stories of being at the sharp end of change. In addition they wanted to discuss what Christians are called to do and say in the light of increasing change, and to learn how to work with change.

The Scottish Presentation.

The first presentation of the morning was from the group from Scotland. Martin Robb gave an outline of the country whilst Jenny Robb showed a range of photographs of the country. He commented that 80% of the population live in 2% of the land which leaves 20% to look after the other 98%. This creates a very rural environment.

The key text which Martin used to inform his thinking and to share with the group was "I do not think that God will ask us how he created the earth, but he will ask us what we did with his creation". This led him to pose some key questions about the way land was used and the structures used to manage it. In Scotland there is a strong tradition of the land being used for food, leisure and as a place of beauty to be explored. There is a need to celebrate this and focus on the local food and traditions. Farmers markets have been a very positive way to achieve this. There are now 150 in the UK with an income of £43m per year. Food is a choice and we can choose cheap or quality food production.

Bill Harvey went on to talk about his situation as an elder and lay minister in the Church of Scotland. There are over 160 vacancies for ministers at the moment and this is expected to rise to 200. He has been trained as a lay minister and recently covered one of these vacancies. He preaches, takes funerals and offers communion to those at home, but is not allowed to celebrate communion or conduct marriages or baptisms. He is not despondent at this situation. It is raising up lay people to take on new responsibilities.

Martin concluded by looking at two key issues; the place of Genetic Modification and the importance of leadership for change. There was some small group discussion time and then some questions.

The Romanian Presentation.

The second presentation was from Caroline Fernolend from Romania. She is vice-president of the Mihail Eminescu Trust, an organisation which works to reconstruct Saxon villages in her region. To do this they use Roma people who now live in these villages, and it is a way to attract tourists and thus generate employment and invigorate the economy. Since the arrival of democracy in her country there have been large numbers of Roma people who have moved into the Saxon houses but do not have the traditional skills to maintain them. This has also created some cultural issues. Her role has been to set up training programmes to develop traditional craft skills such as brick and tile making, bricklaying, carpentry and blacksmithing. They have also tried to use local materials where possible.

This had been difficult at first but now there are 19 villages and 130 people involved

(of whom 85 are Roma). They have worked on a restoration of a range of churches - Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic and Saxon. They have also worked on traditional wooden houses, as well as creating traditional guest rooms which allow tourists to experience what it would have been like in a Saxon home. Future projects include the construction of an eco sewerage system, and creating a children's home from a house previously used as a pastor's house.

Overall the objective was to raise openness and to develop communities which in turn would be attractive to tourists. This had all been a huge change but one that has now attracted considerable national and international interest. Funding has come from UK, USA and beyond. Tourists are now coming, and this project is a visible demonstration of how change can be a very positive force in a community.

The Baltic States Presentation.

After lunch Daiva Ziuramskaite from Lithuania and Hanss Jensons, originally from Sweden but now working in Latvia, spoke. Daiva painted a picture of the situation in all the Baltic states both from the perspective of the time of the soviet occupation and then later when democracy came. In the occupation the churches had a very tough time where many buildings were closed, a number of priests and pastors were killed and many others fled. This legacy of communist atheism is still prevalent even now, and shows itself in a variety of ways in each of the states. There is a mostly poor and aging population in the rural areas as the young people are drawn to the cities.

Hanss described his experience of moving from Sweden in 2000 to pastor a church in Latvia. He noticed many fields which were not farmed and realised that the key issue of land rights was still in the process of being resolved. Many farmers lost their land and struggled to find the appropriate paperwork to show ownership to the state. As a result they are unable to return to working this land. This is aggravated by foreign investors who are buying up land. The church does own some land and in some places is selling it to finance salaries for pastors.

In looking for signs of hope Hanss spoke of a network of traditional markets where products could be bought and sold. There was also the possibility to combine tourism with farming to attract people to the area. Overall it is a tough place to minister where the gap between rich and poor continues to grow. The role of the minister is to be alongside people, often going through many problems and having little resources; and the politics of the history continues to intervene.

The CEC-KEK Presentation.

The final presentation of the day was from Matthew Ross from CEC-KEK. Initially he outlined his role within CEC-KEK commenting that rural affairs was only one part of his role but a very important one. Rural matters were critical for the EU given that 50% of their budget was spent on this. He had hoped to be sharing the final report from a large project on agriculture, but things were a little behind schedule and the report was still in the final review stages. He could however share the majority of the findings with the conference.

The report covers a wide range of topics; food production, low income for farmers, change in rural communities, the environment, issues such as biofuel and food security, along with the ethics of food subsidy and the impact of globalisation. The title is likely to be "Food Is Precious" which reflects the emphasis on how food security can be preserved in a world where the population of the world is predicted to rise significantly. The number of hungry people in the world has been stabilised at 900 million in recent years. This is in equal measure a scandal that so many remain but also a credit to farmers for keeping up with increased demand.

The report also tackles a major controversy which will be significant in a few years. The next round of setting the EU budgets will take place in 4 years and this will be the first time this has happened since the expansion of the EU. The newer countries are very likely to demand a fairer distribution of the pot and the older member states, especially France (which is heavily subsidised) is likely to come off badly. This budget process will also coincide with the next presidential elections in France. It is hard to see how everyone will be satisfied. Matthew concluded by recognising that agriculture is a key issue for the churches moving forward. The church is uniquely placed to offer insights at both high level and at the grass roots and must contribute to the debate.

In the evening the small groups met and talked about what they had heard during the day and their reactions to the presentations.

Wednesday 3rd September

The Celtic group led the morning worship with a summer blessing outside. Fortunately the rain held off!

The Theology of Change and Change Management.

Nicky McGinty offered some reflections on Theology and Change. Her presentation is captured in the following pictures:

Objectives:

- * To bring together some business thinking and theology
- * to start to see change differently
- * to equip you to work with change

3 questions to ask

Why? → Where? → How?

Why? branches into internal and external.

The change journey

Denial

Anger

Exploration

Acceptance

Agenda

- Introduction
- input on people and change
- group conversation
- input on 4 types of change
- group conversations
- Questions

Theology and Change

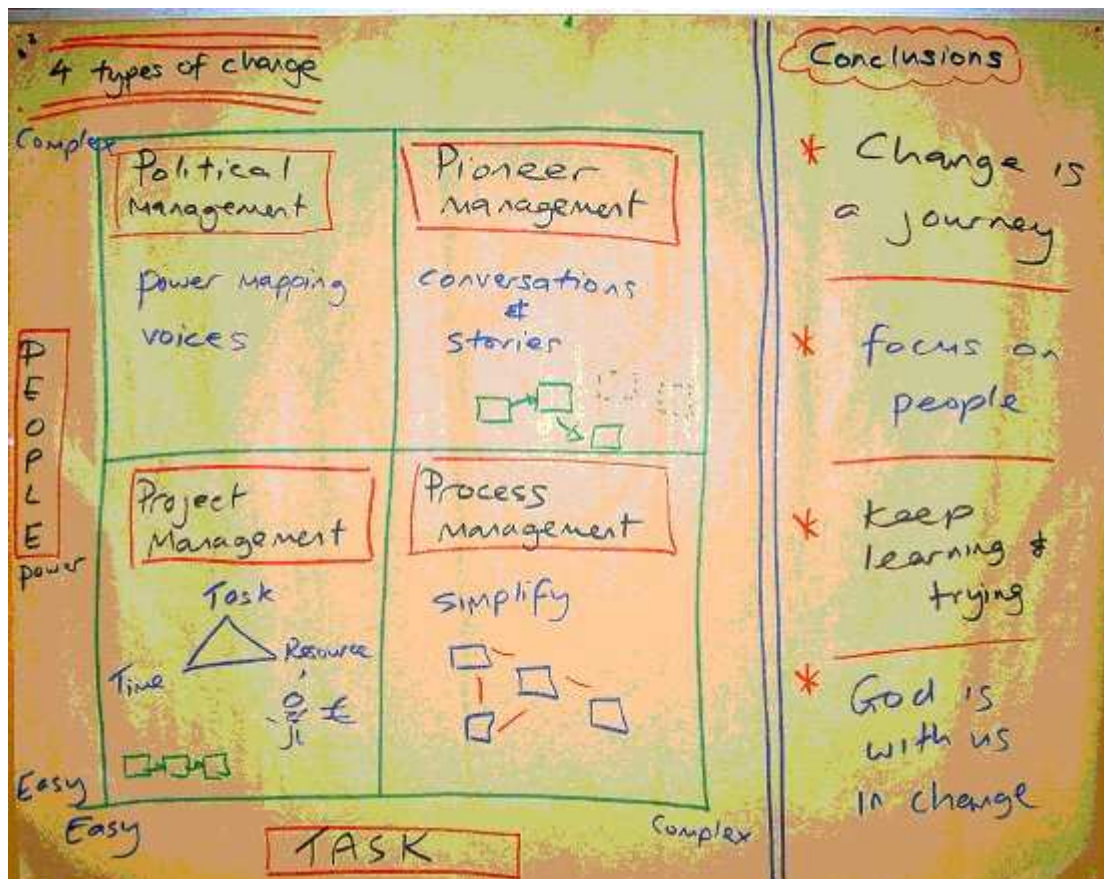
Taking people with you

Endings

Neutral zone (wilderness)

New Start

Managing Transitions
William Bridges



Presentation by Young People.

Then the conference heard from some young people. Firstly from Matthias Augst from Germany who farms about 1km from where the conference took place, and then from Nicole Scherrer and Philipp Gisin both from Switzerland. Dominique Gisin-Schäublin began the session with a large cow bell, a traditional symbol of Switzerland, which used to be worn by the leading cow but is now kept in a barn and used rarely.

Matthias is a farmer who farms 205 Ha and also teaches. He looked back at the changes in this area. Firstly he commented that the biggest change is around the rising price both to buy and sell. This is making it very hard for people to make a profit, especially with rising energy costs. He sees the interference of the EU in rural matters as unhelpful, creating mountains of paperwork and bureaucracy. As he looks forward he was concerned as to how the political situation might develop along with the two most pressing issues; climate change and large GM companies (especially the role of Monsanto). He cited many examples of how the climate has already changed in his area. He asked people to keep watch on companies like Monsanto, which are trying to gain control of global food production.

Nicole and Philipp spoke about their own education and their commitment to agriculture in their country. They shared the many routes possible for people to qualify in this area. and how they had both followed paths which combined practical

experience on a farm with more academic study. Then they spoke of the challenges facing them. They also commented that, despite being outside the EU, they faced issues in dealing with the free market they found themselves in. Having chosen to focus on quality products, which Switzerland is famous for, they were having to accept lower prices. There are some opportunities for diversification and finding new products.

They concluded their presentation with a passionate explanation of why they were committed to remaining in agriculture and were proud of their heritage. Nicole showed the group new products they had developed such as a new alpine butter, some fruit and high quality flowers. She reminded the group that what we put into the land we will get out of it.

In the afternoon the group went to visit two places. First, Fuhrländer, a firm which produces wind turbines in Waigandsheim and Fuchskaute; and then the farm belonging to the Hüschi family and their two partners at Busenhausen near Altkirchen, which has a facility for generating electricity using biogas.

In the evening after some time to talk through CERN matters, the small groups met again and talked about what they had heard during the day and their reactions to the presentations. The evening continued with some songs and socialising!

Thursday 4th September

The day began with CERN business and elections: Rudi Job (D), Andrew Bowden (UK), Dieter Sonntag (D), Stephen Cope (UK), Dominique Gisin-Schäuble (CH), Martin Robb (UK), Szilard Szatmari (RO), and Matthew Ross, Executive Secretary of the Church and Society Commission (CSC) of Conference of European Churches (CEC/KEK). Robert Miller asked for an orthodox member for the steering group. Mladen Janjic (Serbian Orthodox Church) will try to find an orthodox priest working in the rural area of Serbia.

Final Session.

Nicky helped the group begin to discover the main themes that had emerged for them over the conference. This was done by each person focusing on the main things they were taking away from the conference. People then worked in pairs and in groups of four to prioritise their learning. Each group of four shared what they were taking away with the whole group. These ideas were clustered and four main themes emerged. These were:

- The importance of this network in bringing people together.
- Being able to hear and learn from many different people and places.
- Hope.
- Encouragement and challenge.

The clusters and the other ideas are shown in the picture.

