

**COUNCIL FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY
CHURCH OF ENGLAND**

**RESPONSE TO OPEN LETTER FROM CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN
CHURCHES: 'WHAT FUTURE FOR EUROPE?'**

1. We read the open letter on 'What future for Europe?' with much interest. It contains careful, well-informed and concise analysis of some of the 'multiple and interrelated crises facing Europe today' (p. 2, though in the text all page numbers appear as 13). Its reminder of the need for common values in order for human relationships at any level to flourish, including those between nations, is timely. It seeks to open up a substantial conversation on the way to the next CEC General Assembly as to how the member churches of CEC might speak together into the current European situation with clarity and with hope.
2. Nonetheless, because we believe that such a conversation should indeed be a high priority, we would wish to pass on a number of reservations as to the value of this document for framing it. It represents an important piece of background work, but our advice would be that something rather different is needed to promote constructive and inclusive engagement across the range of CEC's member churches in the present context.
3. This is partly because of the assumption, stated on p. 1 and pervasive throughout, that the European Union (EU) has to be 'central' to any discussion about the future for Europe and about its common values (so also the fourth bullet point on p. 1, repeated on p. 19). So long as CEC insists on an approach which begins by stating that 'the focus will be on the European Union, and the deep challenges facing the EU today' (p. 2), there is bound to be a certain awkwardness now as to how churches based in the United Kingdom can enter the conversation, even allowing for the significant presence of the Church of England in continuing member states of the EU in Continental Europe through the Diocese in Europe. Of course, the EU has to be an important part of any conversation by the churches about the future of Europe. Does it have to be 'central', and if so why?
4. The letter helpfully acknowledges on p. 3 that differences between Christians regarding the value and function of the EU are 'perfectly legitimate', yet such differences, which are a sharp reality for us, do not seem to find a ready space within the conversation that is envisaged in the letter. Moreover, the letter itself recognizes that a country leaving the EU could plunge it into 'deeper crisis' (p. 9), with the possibility of the EU's 'partial unravelling and marginalisation' (p. 11). The UK's decision to leave the EU means the situation has changed profoundly since the letter was written, not just for the UK but for other member states and for Europe more widely. This needs to be acknowledged if we are to be able to make the substantial contribution we hope we could.
5. Aside from the way that the political and social context is represented, we would also have some questions about the way in which it is envisaged the member churches of CEC might speak into that context. To begin with, some of the things

that are not 'central' to the text might be noted. Christ is only mentioned once, in the context of a passing reference to the 'body of Christ' on p. 15, where we also find the sole references to mission and witness, all in the context of the weight of the churches' contribution being loaded onto *diakonia*, used in a sense that has neither institutional nor theological purchase for most British churches. The gospel is also only referred to once, on p. 3, where its message is immediately defined as 'Love your enemies, forgive others as you are forgiven, be in solidarity with the poor and the down-trodden, and share with your neighbour' – a definition of God's good news for the world in Jesus Christ that is questionable on a number of levels, not least in its being composed entirely of imperatives.

6. The bullet points that introduce and conclude the letter put at the centre of the conversation it seeks to promote the EU (only?) as 'a community of values' and the visibility of certain 'Christian virtues'. One might therefore expect the relationship between values and virtues, and between a Christian theological account of them and an account that can serve a 'pluralist' EU in which Christianity does not hold a determinative position (p. 12), to be central to how that conversation is to be developed. In fact, however, 'virtues' are referred to nowhere else in the document (and the list given in the bullet points has little secure grounding in the rich teaching of Scripture and tradition on this subject), while the vitally important questions about how churches speak distinctively about values and virtues in pluralist societies appear unexamined if not unacknowledged.
7. The letter's call for the stronger expression of (Christian?) values within the EU and its institutions would appear to depend on the following three premises: the common values of the EU have become weaker (pp. 13 & 16); it is possible to take action to make them stronger; and the churches are well placed to take such action (p. 17). None of these points are self-evident, though all are defensible, yet they are simply asserted, not argued for. Crucially, if the problem is that common values have weakened, then what must be done to address this depends on a thorough analysis of *why* this has happened. That would also help to give some clarity to the question of what it is that the churches can and should do.
8. While this letter offer some useful background, a worthwhile conversation on the future of Europe at the next Assembly will require a much clearer analysis both of the political, social and cultural situation and of the scope for the churches to have a significant impact on that. If it is to allow us, and, we would imagine, some others to participate fully, it will also need to be framed in terms of rather different political and theological presuppositions. As the Archbishop of Canterbury stated in his recent public lecture in Paris on a future vision for Europe, which addressed like the open letter the need for a renewal of values, 'A vision for Europe must go beyond the boundaries of the European Union.'

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