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THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT IN EASTERN EUROPE

David Russell is a Scot and a Baptist. Of both these important facts he is himself very sure. To most of those who have come into contact with him he has quickly made it quite clear what a tremendous advantage it is to be blessed with these two attributes in life! Yet, at the same time, following good Scots and Baptist traditions, he has been wide open to other countries and other Christian confessions. Eastern Europe has found a specially large place in his ecumenical affections. He has worked assiduously for the cause of the ecumenical movement in that area, especially in the fields of human rights and the provision of theological literature. Thus a contribution on the question of the ecumenical movement in Eastern Europe is not out of place in a volume such as this. The countries to be considered, although not necessarily in the following order, are: the German Democratic Republic (D.D.R. - more commonly known as East Germany), Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria and the Soviet Union (U.S.S.R.). Albania must also be remembered, if only to record that no organised religious activity of any kind is permitted in that country. Rather than attempting a general survey of church activity in those countries, this article looks at ecumenical co-operation as it is practised amongst those churches which see such involvement as part of their mission task. It must be understood that, apart from the churches referred to in this article, others exist and have an active life amidst the difficulties of finding the way to be a church in Socialism.

A considerable variety of church situations exist in the East European countries. The picture of a sullen greyness covering all church activity once one crosses into these countries is completely erroneous. There is, of course, the same underlying principle of more or less active atheistic opposition to the life and work of the churches, but this is dealt with differently in different countries. Sometimes even in opposite ways. Thus, whilst the Polish state acted by withdrawing all financial aid from the churches, the Czechoslovak state took the line of making all priests and pastors virtually civil servants by paying their salaries. Ecclesiastical realities in the countries of Eastern Europe also vary enormously. With the exception of the German Democratic Republic, where the Protestant churches form a majority, in all other countries the Protestant churches are in a minority - sometimes an infinitesimally small minority. In Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland, the Roman Catholic Church forms a strong majority. In Bulgaria, Romania and the U.S.S.R. the ecclesiastical majority is Orthodox; whereas in Yugoslavia the majority church is Orthodox in some provinces and Roman Catholic in others.

The ecumenical impulse came early to some of the East European churches, both Orthodox and Protestant, and some of their leaders were to be found amongst those who, before World War II, helped to prepare the way for the foundation of the World Council of Churches (W.C.C.). The degree and method of their involvement varied, but their main interest seems to have been questions of Life and Work, rather than the doctrinal discussions of Faith and Order. Then came World War II and, following the armistice in 1945, in the mid and late '40s the establishment in all the East European countries of socialist

political, social and economic structures, based on the pattern developed in the U.S.S.R. since the 1917 Revolution, and all applying a policy of militant atheism. Suddenly the churches in those countries, as earlier the churches in the U.S.S.R., were faced with completely new and largely unimagined conditions for their work. Facing new difficulties and restrictions, they were all challenged to discover the few possibilities for action that remained to them. Under the previously existing regimes in virtually all these countries, the younger churches - Baptists, Congregationalists, Methodists, Pentecostals etc. - had had no legal personality and, as a consequence, no legal rights. Under the Socialist regimes, all churches, ancient or modern, Orthodox, Catholic or Protestant, were placed on the same basis, acquiring legal status, receiving the same few rights and being subjected to the same numerous difficulties and restrictions. The pressures of this new situation urged the churches nearer to each other for consultation and support. In view of the need to appreciate what could and should be done in a secularized society and atheistic state and a situation of separation between church and state, ecumenical hesitations became relativised.

Another important element in the situation was that, on the conclusion of World War II, the East European countries had their frontiers redrawn - a traumatic experience difficult to appreciate for those living in countries with fixed frontiers, but real enough for those directly concerned. The effect on some ecclesiastical structures was dramatic. Some churches became separated into parts now living in different countries, bringing with it problems of restructuring, especially for those members, whose nationality having changed overnight, found themselves an often unwanted confessional minority in their new country. Thus the churches of Eastern Europe, badly maimed, found themselves in the midst of national situations where life had been shattered. Against the background of the horrors of the war - sometimes including their own part in it - they had to turn towards the gigantic task of rebuilding Eastern Europe both physically and spiritually. Could this be undertaken together? Was a common Christian witness possible? In the developing ecumenical conversation primary attention was given to practical issues of peace, justice, reconciliation and reconstruction - although these concerns inevitably led to questions of Faith and Order. This ecumenical activity has grown with increasing vigour over the years, discovering its own priorities and expressions, and contributing them - sometimes against resistance and misunderstanding - to the common resources of the oikoumene.

It was only to be expected that the Communist state authorities would view this burgeoning ecumenical activity with hesitation and suspicion. However, they were realist enough not to oppose any insurmountable difficulties to the participation of the 'ecumenical' churches from their countries in what was obviously a dynamic movement. There were two dimensions to the question. There was the internal dimension, where the drawing together of the churches in the individual countries could mean a strengthening of the Christian witness in those countries. But there was also the international dimension, which carried with it the risk of the involvement of the churches in international concerns both within and beyond Europe, but against which had to be weighed the fact that the voices of 'their' churches would be heard abroad, with a positive propaganda potential.

Thus the problem faced by the Communist authorities was not so much how to prevent ecumenical activity as how to influence and, possibly, derive advantage from it. The churches actively assuming responsibilities in the field of Church and Society, with a commitment to the alleviation of human suffering, to justice and to reconciliation, confidence-building and peace, the attitude of the state authorities, for whom this terminology was important, began to become more positive. The formation of the Christian Peace Conference (C.P.C.) in 1958 and of the Conference of European Churches (C.E.C.) in 1959 were both an expression of, and a contribution to, this as in questions of Church and Society, the churches enjoyed advantages not available to governments. The fact that the churches insisted on discussing questions of Faith and Order, as being basic to those of Church and Society, interested the state authorities comparatively little; in order to further the latter, little obstruction was offered to the former. At the same time it must be noted that Faith and Order discussions with a view to denominational integration are no priority in the East European situation. Taking into account the various disabilities under which the churches in East Europe work, of which the three most important are the restrictive framework for church activities, the difficulty of access to the information media and the limited resources available for ecumenical structures, a remarkable amount of ecumenical activity and initiative is being realised.

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Turning our attention to summary descriptions of the situations in the different countries, it is noted that they fall into two groups: the first, is those countries where there exists some form of national ecumenical council - Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic, Hungary and Poland; the second, those countries where no formal ecumenical structure exists on a national scale - Bulgaria, Romania and the Soviet Union. Yugoslavia is a special case, since there is the slow development of a form of national ecumenical structure.

Czechoslovakia has had a form of national ecumenical council since 1955, originally called the Ecumenical Council of Churches in Czechoslovakia. But in 1970 the churches in Slovakia tended to undertake their own ecumenical activity and, consequently, the name was reduced to Czech Ecumenical Council. 1984 saw a reintegration of ecumenical activity and the name became the Czechoslovak Ecumenical Council of Churches. Eleven Protestant, Old Catholic and Orthodox churches belong to the Council, but the Baptist Union is not a member. Since Czechoslovakia is probably the European country which has been most subjected to the enormous political upheavals of this century, the Council gives a high priority to the overcoming of internal barriers created by that historical fact. This Council, like the other three councils to be mentioned, has a very small permanent staff, which services its committees on Biblical work, theological study, hymnology, women's and youth work, diaconal activity and theological education. They are engaged also in the preparation and conducting of the numerous ecumenical international conferences which Czechoslovakia hosts. Any form of structured ecumenical activity with the Roman Catholic Church is hampered by the fact that there is no national Conference of Roman Catholic Bishops in Czechoslovakia.

In the German Democratic Republic the national council is called the Council of Christian Churches in the German Democratic Republic, where the term 'Council' is a rather unsatisfactory translation of the term 'Arbeitsgemeinschaft'. Sixteen churches, including the Federation of Evangelical Free Church Congregations (Baptist), form the membership. In addition five other churches, including the Roman Catholic Church and the Exarchate for Central Europe of the Russian Orthodox Church, have observer status. The Council co-ordinates the more traditional ecumenical activities such as the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, regular ecumenical worship services, Bible Weeks, Passion-tide services and concerts of church music, a valuable way of maintaining contact with the mass of the people. The Council gives priority to the study of mission in a secularized society, to questions of service and witness in a socialist state, to matters related to the fall in membership of all the churches, and to publication work. An interesting development has occurred in relation to the Council's priority interest in problems of peace and international relationships. An organism has been developed with the title of 'Ecumenical Convention (Versammlung) for Justice, Peace and the Preservation of Creation'. Preparatory meetings began in June 1987 and the Roman Catholic Church participated as an observer. When the full sessions began, however, (in 1988 and 1989), the Roman Catholic Church became a full participant, as well as in the thirteen working groups which are functioning between the 1988 and 1989 sessions.

The Hungarian ecumenical situation provides an interesting example of a double conciliar structure working in close co-operation. The older and smaller of these two bodies is the Council of Free Churches in Hungary, founded in 1944, with the original purpose of protecting members of the Free Churches from Nazi persecution. Nine of the small Protestant churches form its membership and co-operate in the co-ordination of various mission, publication, building and evangelism activities - which is now the task of the Council. The Council also publishes its own quarterly, known as 'Commission'. The larger body, the Ecumenical Council of Churches in Hungary, also has a comparatively long history, since a preparatory committee was formed as long ago as 1943 whilst the Ecumenical Council itself was founded in 1948. It has nine members, eight being churches and the ninth being the Council of Free Churches. The Baptist and Methodist Churches are full members of both bodies and the President of the Council of Free Churches is also a Vice-President of the Ecumenical Council. The activities of the Ecumenical Council include theological work, the Council publishing its own theological review every two months; youth and women's work, both comparatively new ventures for the Council; inter-church aid and medical assistance and the administration of the Ecumenical Church Loan Fund (E.C.L.O.F.) - a fund which works in many countries and is intended, through loans, to assist with building repairs and construction.

A recent decision of the Ecumenical Council has terminated the old practice whereby the Senior Bishop of the Hungarian Reformed Church - the largest of the Protestant churches - was the permanent President of the Council. The office will now rotate every three years between the Reformed Church, the Lutheran Church, the Council of Free Churches and the Orthodox churches. The Ecumenical Council is very active in relating to the international ecumenical organisations,

in Bible translation work, in hosting international meetings and welcoming foreign guests. A recent very significant development has been the considerable improvement in contacts with the Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference of Hungary. A first official meeting between leaders of the two bodies, which took place on 1st December 1987, issued a joint expression of contrition for past enmity and a solemn promise to develop and strengthen fraternal contacts. This promise is already being put into practise. In all this ecumenical activity the Baptist Union of Hungary, although comparatively small, plays a significant role.

Preparatory work for the formation of the Polish Ecumenical Council began in 1940, and a provisional form of council was constituted in 1942. The Council was fully established immediately after World War II. Seven churches, Protestant, Old Catholic and Orthodox, form its membership. An eighth member - the United Evangelical Church - at the beginning of 1988 resolved itself into the four sections of which it was constituted. Each of these four churches is now likely to seek direct membership in the Council. Since 1973 the Polish section of the British and Foreign Bible Society, with its long and fascinating history of work in Poland, has had the status of associate member. There is also a very close relationship with the Christian Theological Academy. An outstanding example of ecumenical theological education in East Europe, the Academy provides basic theological education for the students of all the non-Roman Catholic churches in Poland - from the Pentecostals to the Orthodox. The significance of this experience for future ecumenical developments in Poland can hardly be overestimated. The priorities of the Council are work in the fields of theology, catechetical questions, women, youth, inter-church aid, broadcasting activity [The non-Roman Catholic churches in Poland have a considerable history of radio work. Although, not permitted access to Polish transmitters, they were permitted to make recordings in Warsaw in a well-equipped studio, which were then taken to West Europe and beamed back to Poland over Radio Monte Carlo!] and mixed commissions with the churches in the two parts of Germany. Relations between the Ecumenical Council and the Roman Catholic Church, until recently, were virtually non-existent, in a situation where the non-Roman Catholic churches represented an extremely small minority. Since the election of Karol Cardinal Wojtyla as Pope and the succession of Cardinal Glemp to the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland, a more positive situation has developed. There is now a Joint Commission on Ecumenism, meeting biannually, with a sub-commission on theological dialogue meeting four times a year. There is also co-operation between the Christian Theological Academy and the Roman Catholic theological schools, and the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is celebrated together.

Yugoslavia is a special case. The turbulent ecclesiastical history and the complex ethnic problems of this country, with its federative political structure, influence and retard the effective development of ecumenical relationships within the country. In 1968 an Ecumenical Council of Churches was projected and a secretary appointed, but there seems to have been little enthusiasm to move far beyond this point and progress is extremely slow. Some eight churches, Orthodox and Protestant, engage in ecumenical activity, mainly in the form of co-operation with the international

ecclesiastical structures, both ecumenical and confessional. There exists a loose relationship between the Protestant churches, which have a joint theological academy in Zagreb, and between these and the Serbian Orthodox Church. Relationships with the Roman Catholic Church, which is found mainly in Slovenia and Croatia, are at best sporadic and unofficial, suffering, as do those in other parts of the country, from the long shadows still cast by the horrifying strife, also of a confessional nature, which marked World War II in Yugoslavia.

With Bulgaria we pass to the second group of countries - those where no national ecumenical organisation exists. This is very much due to the specific religio-ecclesiastical structure of Bulgaria. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church is the majority Christian church in the country. As a remnant of the Ottoman occupation of the country, there is a small but significant Muslim community. Finally there are the Christian churches of more recent date - the Baptists, Congregationalists, Methodists and so on. The problem is that these Protestant churches together form such an exceedingly small minority that any desire for ecumenical contacts between them and the Orthodox Church is severely hampered by the difference in size and the human resources available. Nevertheless, occasional contacts do take place and a few theological students from the small churches have received theological training in the Orthodox Theological Academy in Sofia. Furthermore the Orthodox, Congregationalists and Baptists participate in international ecumenical activity. Peace questions afford virtually the only subject on which contacts take place between Christians and Muslims.

The Romanian situation, resembling the Bulgarian in that the largest church, by far, is the Romanian Orthodox Church, differs from the Bulgarian situation, in that there are also Protestant churches of numerical significance, with which ecumenical exchange is possible. But the whole interconfessional relationship is vitiated, especially at the present time, by increasingly complex ethnic problems. The Orthodox, the two Lutheran and the Reformed churches are ecumenically active, whilst the Baptist Union - a fast growing body, is deeply divided over interconfessional ecumenism, although it plays an important part in European Baptist affairs. Contacts with such Roman Catholics as remain in Romania, after the absorption into the Orthodox Church of the Eastern Rite Catholics after World War II, are tenuous.

Turning to the Soviet Union attention has to be paid to three important elements which distinguish this from other East European situations. First, the question of size needs only to be mentioned to be obvious. Second, the ethnic and racial complexity of the Soviet Union results in ecclesiastical variety related to topography and ethnic origin. Third, for over 70 years most of the churches found today in the Soviet Union have been under severe persecution - and have survived. For other churches, such as those in the Baltic republics, the period of trial has been somewhat shorter but nonetheless severe. This terrible experience has had positive implications for the pursuit of ecumenical relationships. Although no national ecumenical organisation exists in the Soviet Union, fraternal relationships of varying intensity and nature, exist between the three ancient churches, Armenian or Orthodox, and the six which derive from the Reformation, including the very active All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians - Baptists. Their main point of contact is

their common involvement in work for peace, which also provides an opportunity to meet together as Christians of different persuasions. The principal mover in all such contacts, the Russian Orthodox Church, the largest of the churches in the Soviet Union, has also invited the representatives of the other Soviet churches to meet together on several occasions to discuss theological and practical problems relating to their activity in the C.E.C. Such occasions have also seen the presence of Roman Catholic participants from Lithuania or Latvia, where the church forms a large majority. There is ecumenical co-operation in Bible distribution work until recent times a rare experience! [As of early Autumn 1988, something between 1½ and 2 million copies of the Bible or New Testament are officially in process either of printing in or importation to the Soviet Union in various languages and editions.] On suitable occasions there are ecumenical services and in one or two places, different confessions share the same church building. On the festive occasions of the different churches the other churches are often represented - the recent celebration of the millenium of the Russian Orthodox Church proved a remarkable ecumenical experience.

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Having glanced briefly at the respective national ecumenical situations, that activity is now placed within the broader framework of international ecumenical organisations and activities. The great majority of ecumenically-minded churches in East Europe are members of the W.C.C., taking their membership obligations very seriously - so far as they are able. The few which are not part of the W.C.C. are too small to qualify for membership. All these churches, whether large or small, are members of the C.E.C., which has no such numerical criterion. The C.E.C., with its main task of building bridges of reconciliation between churches in East and West Europe, has been much appreciated by the East European members. Over the years an increasing number of meetings of the W.C.C., the C.E.C. and other ecumenical organisations are being hosted gratuitously by the churches in East Europe. Virtually all the churches in East Europe are active members of the Christian Peace Conference (C.P.C.), which developed out of their own situation and was founded in Prague in 1958. The C.P.C. has been a valuable means of ecumenical contact amongst the East European churches themselves as well as with Christians from around the globe. Most of the world confessional organisations, like the Baptist World Alliance with the European Baptist Federation, have some form of European sub-grouping. The East European churches play a full part, at both the world and European regional levels of their respective world confessional bodies. Lack of space will permit only the briefest mention of the numerous bi-lateral dialogues in which the East European churches participate, of their keen activity in such bodies as the United Bible Societies, the Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women, the European Conference of Church Men's Work, the Ecumenical Youth Council for Europe, and a large number of other organisations intended to co-ordinate specific activities e.g. the International Association for Inner Mission and Diaconia. In most of these activities the Baptist presence is by no means lacking. The common view that the East European churches are somehow unable to make a positive contribution to ecumenical activity is unjustified. They have a great contribution to make - and they make it. And now appear

'perestroika' and 'glasnost' and who dares, as yet, to describe what this will mean for the churches and their relationships? Already in some countries things are happening rapidly which, only a short time ago, would have been held to be completely impossible. In other countries the situation remains largely what it was - for the moment. A more constructive understanding of the role of the churches in society and of Christians in a socialist society is increasingly supplanting the old attitude of pure hostility...and where this is all leading can only be a matter for hope and much prayer.

GLEN GARFIELD WILLIAMS