



EBF Theology and Education Division

**Symposium „Baptist Churches and Changing Society:
Eastern-European Experience“**

30 September - 2 October 2010, Tartu, Estonia

Summary of discussion and comments

Discussion and comments after Toivo Pilli's presentation

The Latvian experience shows that for evangelicals there is a need to be more visible in the society. Instead of attracting people to the church, evangelicals need to be more involved in people's lives. Less focus on new methods. As a comparison: Anabaptists built relationships, their visibility was often a protesting, counter-cultural visibility. Present day possibility is also to build positive relationships and become visible in this way. Commenting on Cesis Baptist Church experience, when Baptists became socially involved in local town's life, Olegs Jermolajevs said: „People could touch us!“ – Cornel Boingeanu: In Romania wider society does not know who are Baptists. Cornel's church organised a project – cleaning streets, parks and children's playgrounds. As a result, the mayor invited Cornel for a meeting. He was interested in how the church motivates volunteers. Later the city and church started a joint project. „People do not want to see our doctrines, they want to see a different reality.“ – Alexander Popov commented with humour: „I live in Moscow, not in Russia.“ In Moscow – which is different from the rest of Russia – every Christian group tries to establish their role, and become visible in the mega-city. Baptist churches have to put their efforts in areas where others do little or nothing, emphasised Popov. Baptists work in prisons, they are active also in social ministry. But they need also to present central values and ideas of Christianity. – Einike Pilli: Churches are theoretically ready to do something outside their walls, but in practice they are often so busy with their own programmes that there is no time to ask what is needed in wider society. A more holistic approach to human beings and their needs would be helpful. – Toivo Pilli: I would add a couple of comments. Firstly, it seems that many churches – also in Eastern Europe – strive towards incarnational gospel, and they are not satisfied with presenting verbal proclamation only. Secondly, are the churches ready to analyse what good happens in the society, and are we ready to offer our help, and is there openness to working hand in hand with non-Christian structures, such as NGO-s or city governments? Thirdly, if we talk about visibility then we have to remember that in our society visible is what is in media. – Michael Rohde: I would point out what was said in the presentation: accepting a minority's position, and working from the margins, this is a new way of thinking for our churches. In this situation we need to ask what is relevant in the society, and what is relevant for people who live next to us? Being in media does not always show what is relevant. Media seeks a conflict or a scandal. – Toivo Pilli: Yes, media is looking after extraordinary, what has news value. But what if we find ways to do something what

shows astonishing, extraordinary love? Such was the servant spirit that Mother Theresa lived out, and she certainly was a TV and media face. – Cornel Boingeanu: To be in the midst of the society is one of the greatest challenges for Baptists in Romania. Baptist leaders could reflect on the sentence: „My parish is not the church, but the entire city.“

Discussion and comments after Olegs Jermolajev's presentation

It is a challenge to live in such a way that the church is not intruding where it is not invited, but lives a witnessing life so that it is invited to be more fully part of its context and society. In Romania there is a new challenge – to reach out cross culturally, especially toward gypsy community and other ethnic minorities. Latvians are tired of mission programs, people in Latvia seek for fellowship and friendships. In addition, it was a mistake in the 1990s to stop relationships with Baltic Baptist neighbours, and to invest only into contacts with Scandinavian and other western partners. There is a need to strengthen links between local churches and across the Baltics: „In Soviet times the feeling of sharing and belonging together was stronger.“ After freedom came, little reflection was given to missional context: many old churches that were re-opened in the countryside areas (as buildings were given back to churches) did not prove to be sustainable. Latvian challenge is not only to plant new churches, but also to help old churches to find new vision, to transform and to adjust in changes. Learn change management! It will be a problem, if new church plants remain detached from older, already existing churches – further reflection is needed in order to find out better how to secure support of existing churches to new church plants. Relationship of old and new churches needs a special attention. Regarding the church and society, one recognizes that often in the society change is more rapid than it is in churches. A link between Latvian national identity and Baptist identity: song festivals. There are issues that require further analysis: What kind of churches we plant? What is the role of foreign mission for Baptists? (Often focusing on new church plants international mission may be forgotten.) What is the role of Theological Seminary in church-society relations? The role of women in ministry also has to be re-interpreted in present day context. Today, in Latvia, mission organisations are more open to co-operate with local churches than 15 years ago. One should be aware that evangelical theology and practice that was imported immediately after freedom came for Baltic countries, was very modern. Today, these societies move towards post-modern and post-Christian realities. Church in post-modern culture should be ready to speak a different language when compared to that in modern society. Where is the meeting-place or forum for theological reflection and churches' practice? Where does the analysis take place? These two aspects – churches' practice and theological analysis are often too separate from each other. Where is the meeting point? In the seminary? In local churches? In the union board? Oleg Jermolajevs: „There is an idea to create a Latvian society that would discuss Baptist identity and theology, and be a meeting point for people who are interested in these topics.“

Discussion and comments after Edgars Mazis' presentation

There are signs that Baptist Christians tend in some countries to break their relations with the state structures rather easily. However, sometimes the state would like Christians to be more actively involved in public life for common good. Baptists are flexible, and have fresh views. According to Edgars Mazis, one Latvian Catholic priest said: „You Baptists are like a

small cucumber – small, but fresh“. Baptists must be aware of their resources, and take challenge when it is offered. Example from Latvia, Riga: Winter 2010 was very cold, city government asked Baptist churches to open their doors for homeless. Only one Baptist church responded positively – others considered the inconveniences that came along with this offer were too big, and they refused. On the one hand we say, we want to help and be involved in the society, on the other hand, we are afraid of inconveniences when an opportunity opens up. Often this is the case: we are less ready to respond to the needs of the society, we are more ready to implement our own agenda. In some cases the question is not lack of opportunities, but, rather, there are so many opportunities that churches have to choose what to use, and they are sometimes confused. The participants of the symposium also realised, that being involved in different projects in the society is often a local church's initiative, while Baptist unions do not offer help or advice. The whole church-society set of issues requires careful self-analysis, we must know what we have, before we offer what we have. Baptist union's focus can not be exclusively church planting, there are other challenges and tasks that should not be neglected. Agenskalns church in Riga can be an example how initiative for a holistic mission comes from 'below' – from the grassroots level –, not from 'above' – from leadership structures. Social projects that recognize needs in society are good, but there is a step further that needs to be taken – to live a missional lifestyle, to develop a movement of healthy and socially adequate church life. Alexander Popov: „In the presentation there were many things that are similar also in Russia, but in Russia Baptists are always aware of the presence and influence of the Orthodox Church.“

Discussion and comments after Gunnel Andreasson's presentation

The participants of the symposium noted that this was a very important addition to the discussion. A view from the West (Scandinavia), reflecting on the processes in the East-Europe opened new perspectives. Twenty years ago, when freedom came to many Eastern-European countries, it was easier to start and develop partnerships. Roles of Eastern and Western sides were more clearly defined. It was easier for Western Baptists to be givers, and for Eastern Baptists to be receivers. But balanced partnerships, where mutual giving and receiving would be appreciated and lived out, was harder to achieve. Some partnerships were not ready to change and re-evaluate the roles. The symposium participants discussed if it would be possible to renew dialogue and theological discussions between some of those partners, or between new partners of East and West. Perhaps now there are better possibilities for dialogue between Western and Eastern Baptist churches, leaders, theologians, as everybody has some time-distance from the rapid and turbulent changes of the 1990s. We noted that a conference, focusing on the East-West Baptist experience during the last 20 years would be very beneficial – to analyse what happened. Can East and West learn from each other and support each other with theological input and sharing – now, when material support and humanitarian aid is not so important any more in these particular relationships? For example, some topics that may require further analysis: Eastern Churches need to reflect more thoroughly what it means to be givers; materialism in the West and materialism in the East are not totally the same phenomena; Baptist identity in different contexts and its effect on partnerships. Some comparisons can be made with wider mission: when some decades ago European Baptists were givers in their relations with African believers' communities, then now also Europeans need to learn to receive.

Discussion and comments after Michael Rohde's presentation

Former East-Germany region presents today a situation where people are totally detached from Christianity. For example, 75% of all people in Eastern part of Germany are without any links to any Christian denomination or confession. Statistical data shows that the process of detachment from Christian faith is drastically faster in the Eastern part of Germany, when compared to the Western part. This is a situation where people do not any more have a „language“ to talk about religion. They are often afraid of becoming „indoctrinated“ when meeting Christian teachings or practices. The logic of many people – similar to some other post-Communist countries, such as Estonia – is as follows: During Communist times people were indoctrinated by Communist ideology, and Christian evangelism or proclamation of the Gospel uses similar methods. This is a popular view. The number of people who do not have any religious links or religious interests is growing. They are not necessarily hostile towards Christianity, they just say that they can live without a religion. East-German situation is very different from that of the Western part of Germany. – There are however, some values that people have a high regard of, for example: family, fellowship, work. These are important values in many post-Communist countries. In situations like this it is necessary for Christian churches to start with screening people's values and needs. What Christians offer in the area of work (or unemployment) or family counselling or supporting families in other ways? In addition, in post-Communist countries the culture of expressing one's views and the culture of discussion (in public) is much weaker than in the West. What people say and what they think is often two different things. This is a culture that has its impact also on churches and believers in Eastern part of Germany, but obviously also in other post-Communist areas. „East Germany is an undiscovered country for mission.“

Discussion and comments after Zbigniew Wierchowski's presentation

Polish Baptists were not prepared for change management when political and religious freedom came at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of 1990s. One crucial issue for Polish Baptists is how to lead churches in rapid change. Last 20 years give material for analysis how churches (and Baptist unions) in Eastern-Europe coped with change. – One challenge in this situation is to work towards creating clear missional identity. When compared to earlier times, today Baptists in Poland live mostly in larger cities. The dynamics of mission and involvement in the wider community is different when compared to the earlier agricultural context. In Poland Baptists are increasingly getting rid of the image of a sect. Also, Baptists today are much more aware of the needs in the society. This was a weak aspect after Communism collapsed: Baptists were too little involved in the issues in their cultural context. However, in one area Baptists responded in the 1990s to the needs of society – they organised English language schools when demand for better knowledge of English was widespread. What are the needs today? – In the Roman Catholic context Baptists face a challenge to review their traditional understanding of church membership. Ecclesiology is important for a church in times of religious and cultural changes. Zbigniew Wierchowski emphasised that in some churches (such as in his church) there is open membership in this sense that the Baptist community embraces also Roman Catholic believers, who identify themselves with Catholic tradition but find welcomed and at home in a Baptist community. Often Baptist leaders do not encourage these Catholic believers to change their membership, but rather to be in fellowship. We briefly discussed how this may

influence Baptist identity in a longer term. We also noted that ecumenical openness and cooperation can be a witness in a fragmented culture. Community around Baptist churches, the wider cultural context, expects churches to deal with real issues, social problems, and to reflect their own development openly and honestly. Authentic openness is valued.

Discussion and comments after Alexander Popov's presentation

Situation in Russia – the number of Baptists is small when compared to the number of the population in the country. During Soviet years Baptists were at least criticized, and everybody had heard the word „Baptist“ – due to atheistic propaganda. Today society seldom speaks about Baptists, they have been marginalised. It is a challenge to give an adequate picture who are Baptists, otherwise people will fill in the gap in their knowledge with imagination, and often with superstitions. There are some ways how it is possible to break out from the image of sectarianism: social ministry, also ecumenical cooperation and ecumenical contacts. The participants of the symposium noted that sometimes it is easier to speak about ecumenism as an important value, but more difficult to live according to it, and it is not always self-evident that Baptists emphasise ecumenical cooperation in „their own“ circles. Michael Rohde: It is important for Baptists in Slavic countries to know clearly by themselves why they are not sectarian. Self-analysis and constant self-evaluation is inevitable. In addition, there is a need to develop a more positive image, and not to be satisfied with statements which dimply declare „that Baptists are not like others“. We recognized some areas where committed efforts will help Baptists to come out from the shadows of sectarianism: work for religious freedom, commitment to the freedom of speech. „If we only fight for ourselves not being a sect, we may marginalize other groups“. We also noted that in situations of religious marginalisation issues of public relations become significantly important. We must not accept the externally imposed position of a sect. Baptists can behave in a way that shows their different identity, not a „sectarian“ one. Alexander Popov commented: It is difficult to get into written press and TV in Russia, but Internet is „occupied by Baptists“. Gunnel Andreasson: The image of fundamentalist islamic groups is influencing public opinion about religion in general. This may be relevant also in Russia and in other Eastern-European countries. Cornel Boingeanu: Being a sect is not only a negative reality, it may open new opportunities for being better known in the society – sometimes „small but special“ is better known than „big and ordinary“.

Discussion and comments after Ringo Ringvee's presentation

In the post-Communist and post-Christian context of present day Estonia the trust in institutional church has declined. Generational change (unproportionally large segment of elderly people among church members) affects mostly Lutheran churches. Census that will be carried out next year (2011) will give more information about the situation and may be „a moment of truth“ for churches. We recognized, based on Meego Remmel's comment, that in the Estonian ECB churches the church leadership is passed on from grandfathers' generation to grandchildren's generation. One generation in-between is almost lacking in church leadership. In the society „work-unemployment“ and „family“ are relevant topics – church needs to speak into these issues. This would be „church's incarnational message“. Besides this, as research shows – in Estonia, among the population, educational system is trusted most when compared to other institutions in the society in 2010. What church says and does

in this area? We also discussed the need to meet people on neutral grounds. There may be excellent events in a church building, but people are afraid of hidden agendas or for some other reasons they are cautious to come to the church. Ringo Ringvee emphasised that to be pro-active, not only re-active, is a key for churches' role in the society. Michael Rohde: There is a new aspect of competence that is highly needed in churches – we need not only to read the text (the Bible) but we need to read the context (society). Churches may need help from experts other than spiritual workers, theologians or church members.

Discussion and comments after Cornel Boingeanu's presentation

The symposium participants noted that Romanian evangelicals have undergone significant growth during the years of freedom. Several participants said that their understanding of Romanian evangelical life has been expanded by Cornel Boingeanu's presentation. The Baptist focus, as Cornel Boingeanu said, involves an emphasis on reading the Bible – and there is an expectation in the society to understand the Bible better. There is also an attempt to keep local and global in balance in Baptist mission. Prayer is encouraged in local churches for all European countries, not only for Romania. Churches' vision regarding their role and ministry needs to be broadened. However, it is inevitably important to analyse local realities. Cornel Boingeanu: We asked what is Samaria for us, when we read Jesus mission command... We reached the conclusion that „our Samaria is Gypsy community“. Romanian churches try to follow the pattern: pray – be available – give. The participants of the symposium said during the discussion that when churches focus on minority ethnic groups there is also a need for international awareness and cooperation, especially in the field of human trafficking, as this is often an international “business“, a version of twenty-first-century-slavery. Problems that are related to Gypsy or other minority groups' presence in society will not be solved by getting rid of these groups, sending them out from one country to another. We also noted that motivation is an important factor for churches' involvement in wider ministry in society. With high motivation there is creativity and initiative of church members on the grassroots level to be involved in the processes in the society. This is „salt and light“ influence. Baptist churches' could more thoroughly analyse the role of volunteers and what motivates them. We also concluded, based on the presentation and the following discussion, that churches must be ready to cooperate, both with each other and ecumenically, as well as with non-Christian organisations. „We can work together, but we also need to learn from each other.“ – „We need partnerships with those who have different views, not only with those who have the same way of thinking with us.“

Final comments and ideas

The participants expressed the following ideas at the end of the symposium. These ideas could be explored further in some other EBF meetings or conferences:

- How to influence society from a minority's position – and how to see opportunities in working from the margins?
- Be visible – this is a challenge for churches in Eastern-European post-Communist context.
- Power of unity – how to stay in unity, how to learn from each other? „If we want to see something significant in Europe we have to be united.“

- Practical idea: Start a dialogue in Baltic-Nordic region to analyse the processes in the 1990s in the Eastern European countries, and learn more from Baptist partnerships that developed during these years.
- Never ignore data – check the statistics! Churches should pay more attention to sociological surveys, even if these are always open to interpretations.
- Be ready to find new „wineskins“ for new „wine“!
- Churches have to learn to read better not only the Text (the Bible), but also the Context (society and culture). Researching the Bible goes hand in hand with researching the society.
- Method of the present symposium fitted its goals, it was easy for everyone to contribute and to speak. Forums where participants have opportunities to contribute in conversations may prove helpful also in future.
- Further exploring could be done in the area of suffering and persecution experience in Eastern Europe during communism.
- Eastern-Germany and its mentality – with the influences churches on churches – still very much belongs to Eastern European experience.
- In some countries Baptists have not seriously asked the question: What is Baptist identity in our context? How we see our identity ourselves? How others perceive us as Baptists? – It is important also to listen to other voices, beyond our own circles, who tell us what is our image in wider society.
- „My parish is not only my church, my parish is the entire city.“ The role of leadership in the process of moving towards more missional expressions of being a church.
- There are more opportunities and open doors than we see in the first glance. To see the opportunities may require change in the way we look at things, change in thinking.
- For churches it becomes more important to build relationships, not just to run projects, even if some projects are good and necessary.
- Practical reminder: In April 2011 in Moscow Theological Seminary there will be a conference „History of Soviet Union Evangelicals“.
- Change in mentality in wider culture may mean that we are leaving the age of religions or denominations, and we are entering the age of spiritualities. Formal and institutional forms of religious denominations less important than before.
- We need to remember – using N. G. Wright’s words – that none of our churches is yet a true church, the true church is still to come, still to emerge.
- Openness and authenticity: Baptists must be ready not to speak only of positive things, it is honest to name things that we must improve in our relations with wider society.

TP

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