

UNDERSTANDING EUROPE

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HOW DO WE VIEW THE STATE OF EUROPE TODAY? As Evangelicals, we lack a tradition of viewing Europe as a whole. Often we have seen 'Europe' as a threat, if not 'the Beast' of Revelation. Today's debates about the political future of Europe have roots in the north-south, Protestant-Catholic historic division of the continent. The further north one travels, the more negative about 'Europe' one tends to become.

For by-and-large, Catholics have tended to see the bigger picture, belonging to a global church; Protestants emerged as members of territorial churches, *landeskirchen*, with national synods, and focused nationally. Evangelicals tend to be members of local churches, affiliated or independent, but primarily with a local focus. *Catholics see woods; Protestants see trees; Evangelicals often only see branches.*

In our Evangelical tradition, we basically train *local* church pastors. Hence the leadership of the Evangelical movement is primarily *locally*-focused. Where then are we encouraged to see the big picture, to engage with the mega-issues?

During the Second World War, Robert Schuman spent much time asking himself questions about the kind of Europe that would please God. After escaping from imprisonment in Germany, he went underground in France for the last two years of the occupation and prepared for the post-war era that he knew had to come. As a devout believer, he wanted to see Europe become a 'community of peoples deeply rooted in Christian values'.

His vision remains a challenge to us today. Do *we* have any vision for Europe?

Let's sketch the state of Europe today in terms of *one book, two splits, three images, four apps, five crises, six Europeans and seven signs of hope.*

ONE BOOK:



ART & MUSIC
AGRICULTURE & GARDENING
ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN
BUSINESS & ECONOMICS
DIGNITY & RIGHTS
EDUCATION & SCHOLARSHIP
ETHICS & MORALITY
HEALTHCARE & HOSPITALITY
LANGUAGE & LITERATURE
LAW & JUSTICE
MARRIAGE & FAMILY
POLITICS & DEMOCRACY
SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY
TIME & HISTORY

The single greatest influence on the development of European culture and society has been *the Bible*. When Paul arrived in Greece, he started a revolution that was to transform the peninsula we now call Europe. Messengers bringing the story of this book about one God and his one Son Jesus Christ introduced a totally new worldview: of God and of man, of the spiritual realm and the physical realm, of the dignity and value of human life, of linear history and time as past, present and future. This understanding transformed the lifestyles of people groups from Armenia to Ireland, and from Cyprus to Iceland. Jesus became worshipped in many different languages by Greeks, Romans, Gauls, Celts, Scots, Angles, Saxons, Franks, Friesians, Allemanni, Suevi, Slavs, Rus, Balts and, eventually, Vikings.

This book shaped our art and music, agriculture and gardening, architecture and design, language and literature, law and justice, politics and democracy, healthcare and hospitality, education and training, ethics and morality, marriage and family, science and technology, business and economics far more than any other single influence.

We don't have to be believers to recognise this fact. Even arch-atheist Richard Dawkins says we cannot understand European history without understanding Christianity and the Bible. At the recent Hay Literary Festival in Wales, atheist

professor Steve Jones told his largely secular audience that, while it was easy to be sarcastic about religion, many thought that the New Testament was the finest political document ever written. Our entire society was based on tenets of the New Testament, he added.

In the light of the above, if the Bible is not given its due place in our European school curricula, that has to be the result of either ignorance or prejudice. It cannot be professionalism!

Europe paradoxically is the 'continent' that has been most shaped by this book, and also by the rejection of this book! For, from the time of the Enlightenment onwards, various '-isms' have attempted to replace the Bible as a source of worldview: rationalism, humanism, socialism, communism, fascism and secularism, to name a few. And yet unconsciously they have assumed presuppositions drawn from biblical revelation, such as a linear view of time, the dignity of man, the purpose of life. Even in reacting to the Bible, these '-isms' still assume certain biblical insights, revealing their parasitical origins.

TWO SPLITS:

Both in the eleventh and sixteenth



centuries, major church splits occurred which even to this day continue to shape our headlines. Western Europeans are far more familiar with the latter split, better known as *the Reformation*. Or, should we say 'Reformations', as we need to recognise also the Catholic Reformation and the Radical Reformation, movements which also brought major upheavals in political, economic, social and spiritual areas of life across western Europe.

In 2017, the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation will be commemorated in many places and ways, hopefully not as a triumphalistic Protestant event but as a respectful occasion looking at the positive legacy of this period. We must emphasise that what we have in common is greater than what separates us, while recognising the pain

and suffering caused by this split in the Body of Christ, resulting in decades of religious wars.

Much reconciliation has been effected in recent years, especially through the efforts of recent popes, and the signing of the Joint Declaration of the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ) in 1999 between Catholic and Lutheran leaders, and the unprecedented declaration by Pope Benedict XVI in St Peter's Square that 'Luther was right' about justification by faith.

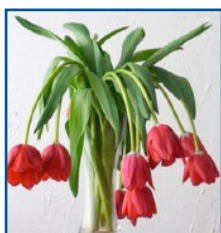
The earlier split of 1054, called *the Great Schism*, is less known in the west. The profound influence of this family feud within the Body of Christ, occasioned by an argument over the Trinity (whether the Spirit proceeded from the Father or from the Father and the Son), has created a deep spiritual faultline across Europe from the Baltics in the north to the Balkans in the south, with profound social, economic and political consequences.

Was it coincidental that the tragic flight MH17 ended right on this fault-line? Vladimir Putin, for example, is deeply resentful of the role Pope John Paul II played in the demise of communism and thus the implosion of the Soviet Union. As we commemorate the centennial of the First World War, we recall how it was triggered right on this faultline in Sarajevo. The more recent Balkan wars of course were fought across this line. NATO, the UN, the EU are powerless to heal this spiritual rift; it is a matter for spiritual leaders.

The story of Europe cannot be understood without recognition of the deep impact of both of these ruptures in church history and their ongoing influence on politics, economics and society. As major failures on the part of the church to flesh out a witness of unity and love, these splits and their ensuing phases of violence have given many cause to reject the Christian message and to seek alternative worldviews.

THREE IMAGES:

Fast forward to 2015 and we can describe Europe in terms of three images. The first is *a vase of wilting tulips*, ready to be thrown out. When placed in the vase they would have been truly beautiful, but from the moment they were cut off from their roots, they were doomed. Roots nurture and stabilise. Yet European society



cut off from its Judeo-Christian roots is a cut-flower civilisation. Hence, instead of drawing life, it draws from a culture of death. Europeans have decided to die out. Abortion, euthanasia, suicide, low birth-rates all contribute to a crisis of demography. No European country has the birth rate of 2.1 sufficient to sustain its own population. This fact carries serious consequences for Europe's future: economically, socially and politically. Yet a neo-liberal, secular pursuit of constant economic growth and ever expanding GDP without regard to relational implications tends to undermine sustainability.

A second image of Europe is that of *a field full of rocks, old tree stumps and junk*. No farmer would go out to sow seed in such a field without preparing the soil first by taking away the rocks, stumps and junk and ploughing the ground. Yet some efforts of evangelism attempt to do just this. Methods that are fruitful elsewhere in the world are sometimes attempted in Europe without recognising the different state of the soil.



Yet a third image is of *a squatted house*. Most Europeans today are like squatters living in a house without being prepared to pay the rent. They have no idea of the Judaic-Christian foundations of the European house, or try to live in denial of them.



FOUR APPS:

How do we then approach such a continent in need with eyes of faith, hope and vision? Let me suggest four 'apps' to download into our hearts and minds.

The first is the *'God's will'* app. Perhaps I'm being very simplistic, but it seems logical to me that it is always God's will for his will to be done. In other words, it is never God's will for his will not to be done. So why do so many Christians seem to believe that it is God's will for his will not to be done in Europe? That Europe is doomed to become 'the beast'? That things *have* to become worse and worse towards the end of times?



When Jesus taught us to pray the Lord's Prayer, was he really serious? Did he really want to see the Father's Kingdom come, the Father's will being done on earth, in Europe, as it is in heaven? Or was he just teasing us?

When we believe the future has been predetermined in this way, we find ourselves caught like rabbits in the headlights of a car, paralysed by fatalism and pessimism, believing we can do nothing to change the future. This can become a self-fulfilling prophecy in which things do get worse, not because God willed it but because we failed in our role as salt and light in the world.

The second app is that of *'the wheat and tares'*. Jesus told the parable of the man who sowed wheat in his field, but his enemy came at night and sowed weeds, or tares. The two grew up together and the man's servants asked if they should pull them out. No, the man said, wait until the harvest time.



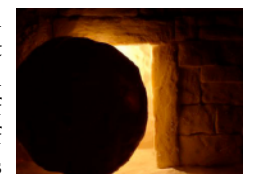
Good and bad things are happening all around us. The media tends to emphasize the negative. The paradox of the wheat and tares is that both grow together.

Look at the twentieth century, surely the worst, the century of Satan! Think of the two world wars, a devastating depression, a cold war, the holocaust, the invention of the atom bomb, and names like Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, Mao Tset Tung and Pol Pot. What a terrible century!

Yet at the same time, it surely was the best century ever for the spread of God's Kingdom! It began with revivals: in Wales, Azusa Street in Los Angeles beginning the Pentecostal movement, in East Africa, Indonesia, Argentina. It saw the world's largest churches emerging in countries like Korea where the gospel had only come a century ago; or in Nigeria, Brazil and other non-western nations. China surprised the world when it opened up to reveal a large, dynamic growing church. More people came into the Kingdom than in all the other centuries put together! Surely this was the century of the Spirit!

Wheat and tares, the good and the bad growing up together. We need to learn to discern what God is doing in our world.

A third app is the *'death and resurrection'* app. Christianity is all about death and resurrection, most centrally and supremely of course, that of Jesus. His

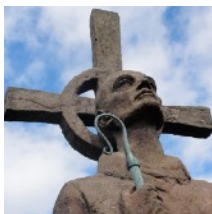


resurrection is the starting point of God making all things new. It is the reason for our hope, as we look forward to the restoration of all things, when creation will be liberated from the bondage to decay.

Yet all through history, there has been a death and resurrection pattern, similar to the apostasy and renewal pattern of the book of Judges. God's people have experienced times of falling away and then renewal as the Spirit of God raised up new movements within and outside of established Christianity. He is committed to the fulfilment of his own purposes in history. He is working towards his goal of 'the knowledge of the glory of God covering the earth as the waters cover the sea' (Habakkuk 2:14).

Therefore, as people of hope, we can look beyond the negative circumstances of any given period in anticipation of what the Spirit will do next. We are expectant people, pregnant with the future, as we look forward in hope to God's ongoing work in human affairs. Our hope is not based on current headlines, trends or events. It is based on God's character and purposes, the two 'unchangeable things' talked about in Hebrews chapter 6, verse 19.

Fourthly, there is the 'faithful minorities' app. God has always chosen to work through obedient, available minorities. The Bible is full of stories about people and families, not economic and political theories. God's ways are relational and he works by starting with an Abraham, a Moses, a Daniel, an Esther, and so on. He uses the weak to confound the strong, the foolish to confound the wise.



I have learned to view history through the 'faithful minorities' lens, tracing the stories of those who were obedient to Jesus' teachings and example. Much of church history can be very discouraging. A lot of church history books should come with a government health warning on the cover: *Beware, this book could destroy your faith!* While studying history at university, I struggled with my faith while reading the terrible things done in the name of the church and of Christianity through the ages.

But when I began to focus on those movements and groups who chose to live in radical obedience to Jesus, I found

myself being greatly encouraged and inspired to follow their example.

FIVE CRISES:



At the State of Europe Forum 2013 in Dublin, Jim Memory of Redcliffe College presented a talk entitled: **Storm Warnings: Five crises that threaten Europe today.** We were sailing on uncharted waters, he said, and we needed help to orient ourselves. Sailors listen to the shipping forecast to find out what is ahead. To be a Christian engaged in life in Europe today, he said, we needed to understand what was happening in our societies, in the economy, in politics and in the environment.¹

The Economic Storm: The consequences of the current economic crisis are evident. In Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece and Ireland there are paralyzing levels of debt. Measures have saved the banks but at the price of capital control. These nations have experienced all the pain but none of the gain of devaluation. Unemployment is at frightening levels. In Greece, six out of ten young people have no job prospects. Many house owners are unable to pay mortgages and face an uncertain future.

Four possible scenarios include: 1. *maintaining the status quo* – ten to twenty years of low or even negative economic growth. The current crisis will be the new normal; 2. *disorderly breakup of the Euro*, devastating countries such as the 'club med' grouping; 3. *structured break up*, in which certain countries would be 'invited to leave' and supported through the transition; 4. *full fiscal union*, unlikely to be acceptable to the whole EU.

The Political Storm: A high pressure area hangs over the EU. The long period of political stability in Europe may be over. Popular levels of trust in the EU have reached record lows. There has been a rise in nationalist, populist and xenophobic movements. Extreme right wing politicians tap into rising unrest.

The Social Storm: Migration-experimentation with models of integration not greatly successful. Secular Europe simply does not know how to handle religions, which refuse to bow at its altar. There are 6.7% of migrants in the EU. *Demographic Change*—all EU states have a fertility rate below the replacement level of 2.1. By 2060, 33% of Germans will be over 65 and the average Italian will be over 50. This will have devastating impact on population figures and an aging population will add major strain to social welfare systems, etc.

The Environmental Storm: Because of the economic storm this is being ignored. Yet the summer ice in the Antarctic is melting. Sea levels have risen by 11mm. Extreme weather is becoming more common. In the UK, four of the five wettest years in history have happened in the last 12 years. The weather is getting more and more unpredictable.

The Religious Storm: Faith refuses to leave the stage despite predictions of its demise. Europe is becoming both more secular and more religious. Younger generations are more open to religious identification (although not in traditional forms).

We find so little practice of faith in Europe because people have put their faith elsewhere (e.g. 'prosperity'). The message is, 'If we can return to economic growth, we will return to security and prosperity.' Jim Memory says: '...I think not.'

He predicts: • *a long period of economic stagnation* • *a reduced Eurozone* • *the east and south to provide migrant workers for the prosperous north* • *EU expansion to continue but also to suffer some losses* • *the UK will either leave the EU or renegotiate its status* • *independence of new states will slow down EU decision-making* • *demographic changes will create inter-generational conflicts (younger generation railing against the old)* • *age-related migration* • *extreme weather will become the norm* • *higher CO₂ levels will boost food and forest growth in higher northern latitudes* • *a resurgence of religiosity.*

These crises must shape our mission in Europe today. Economic hardships are being felt by the most vulnerable in society. The church as one of the few intergenerational communities, and where rich and poor gather in one body, must rise to the challenge to offer hope in the midst of crisis. In a Europe where many services originally provided by the church have been taken over by the state, this is an hour where the church can step back into a crucial role.

¹ See, www.schumancentre.eu/category/inspiring-talks/
- Europe in crisis; threat or opportunity

SIX EUROPEANS:

Europeans come in many different shapes and sizes. Perhaps the following categories of Europeans can help us in our effort to understand Europe today and to know how to communicate with them effectively.

Let's start with Karl from Frankfurt in Germany, a typical post-Christian European. Karl now works for a major international bank in the financial district of Frankfurt. Raised a Lutheran, doubts about the authenticity of Christianity as a student gave way to outright scepticism. He set his goals on pursuing his bank career and becoming a millionaire before he was 40. Christianity simply became irrelevant for life in the 21st century, as far as Karl was concerned. His current girl-friend, his Porsche sports car and yuppie apartment are the realities that interest him the most. Karl is a practising pagan or atheist without necessarily any particular zeal for paganism or atheism as ideologies.



Missiologist Lesslie Newbigin described the post-Christian pagan as being as different from the pre-Christian pagan as a divorcee is from a virgin. The post-Christian was a much more difficult prospect for evangelism, and post-Christian society had become the greatest contemporary missiological challenge, he proposed.

Olga, for Kiev in the Ukraine represents our second major category, the post-Communist European. In western Europe we may not rub shoulders often with this sort of European, but in the former communist countries, post-Communists are the daily reality.

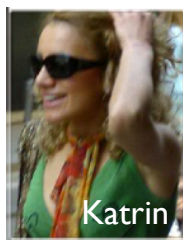


Olga lives in a typical Stalinist-architecture apartment block in Kiev, capital of the Ukraine. A young mother when communism collapsed, abandoned by her alcoholic husband, she raised her two children who now have grown to adulthood. Twenty years after the demise of the Soviet Union, she finds herself sometimes wistfully longing for the 'good old days' when the state claimed to care for citizens from the cradle to the grave. Somehow the hardships of those days have been forgotten.

Millions of post-communists like Olga now live on both sides of the European Union border, from east Berlin to Moscow. While some quickly converted from *dialectical materialism* to *consumer materialism*, changing their political spots (perhaps even now serving in the European Parliament), the majority of older eastern Europeans still live in an ideological vacuum vaguely described as post-Communism. For some, part of that vacuum is being filled by a return to the Orthodox faith of past generations, never totally eradicated by atheistic marxism. Others are discovering new western expressions of Christianity in American-style mega-churches, often preaching a form of prosperity gospel which ignores the deep need for social reformation.

Christian witness in eastern Europe demands engagement with issues of justice and compassion, and a demonstration that the true gospel message will overflow into social transformation and reformation.

Now let's go to Prague in the Czech Republic to meet Katrin and our third category, the post Modern European. Like Olga's children, Katrin is too young to remember life under communism. She has been far more influenced in her lifestyle by Michael Jackson, Madonna and MTV, than by Marxism. She also shares with her peers from western Europe little faith in modernity's assumption that science, reason and human goodness promise a better future. In her view, all 'isms' are 'wasms'; ideologies belong to the past. Ultimate Truth is an illusion. What may be true for others like her parents, teachers, priests or pastors is not necessarily true for her. What counts is now; having fun now; living for sensuous gratification now. Belonging and peer-acceptance is far more important to Katrin than material gain or career advancement. The borders between reality and fantasy are blurred in Katrin's perception; why not just 'mix and match' ideas wherever they come from?



In Amsterdam we meet Mustapha, our post Migrant European. He was born in Holland to migrant workers from the Mediterranean. He belongs to the majority of urban youth in Holland's capital whose parents are non-indigenous Dutch. Yet he does not feel he fully belongs to his parents' world of Islam in their homeland when the whole family goes there on holiday. Nor does he feel

accepted in the white European world. Sometimes he feels blamed for everything going wrong in Dutch society. He has few if any white friends.



Mustapha lives in an identity crisis. He doesn't really know who he is or who he wants to be. Some of his friends have become radical muslims. Others have become secularised and seem to be successful in their careers. A few have even risked everything to become followers of Isa, as Jesus is called in the Koran.

In Paris, we meet Diana, a post Secular European. Like many French, Diana firmly believes in the reality of the spiritual world, and has dabbled in various forms of the occult. In France there are more spiritist healers than doctors, lawyers and priests combined. Even the Vatican has dubbed France a nation of 'baptised pagans'!

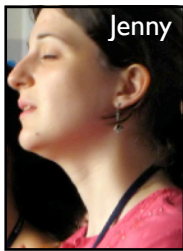


Sadly, the last place Diana would expect to find spiritual reality is in the church. Her experience is that the church is a patriarchal institution with centuries of suppression of women undermining its moral authority. Yet she knows beyond a shadow of doubt that the spiritual world is real and has had multiple personal encounters with spiritual beings. She's not concerned with issues of morality, sorting right from wrong, doctrinal disputes and all the other things she sees Christians arguing about. She is happy to pursue her own brand of spirituality and let others pursue theirs.

Today across Europe, there are millions of 'Dianas' following pop-stars and films stars who also dabble in do-it-yourself spirituality. In government, business and academic circles, spirituality is being taken seriously, influencing decision-making processes, stress-management, office architecture and corporate philosophies. Far from being part of a lunatic-fringe, they are becoming mainstream in European society.

And the sixth European, then? This is the average European Christian. Not that there's really any such thing. But we'll call her Jenny. Jenny, as a typical evangelical believer, would be locally-focused, for whom 'Europe' is far beyond any personal consciousness. With little historical awareness of how God has been at work in Europe's past, Jenny would have little expectation of what God wants

to do in the future. For short memories breed short-sightedness. As an active believer, Jenny would be 'church-centred' rather than 'kingdom-centred', engaged in the weekly church activities, but with little concern for the implications of the Christian faith in the public square other than issues of personal morality. Most likely, she is intimidated, consciously or unconsciously, by a secularism that tells us to 'go and play church over there in the corner' but not in the public square. We must help such sisters and brothers unmask the myth of the permanency of secularism.



Here is the greatest challenge in a Europe today where 522 million are still nominally Christian², and even active believers have little faith, hope and vision for their continent.

Yet hope there is!

SEVEN SIGNS OF HOPE:

Let's now take a look at signs of hope that God is up to something new in Europe.



1. New shakings of God:

We have seen the permanent things of this world shaken before our eyes in recent times. The Berlin Wall and the Twin Towers disappeared even before our eyes, triggering the mixed emotions of awe, joy, fear and uncertainty. Scripture warns us that everything not based on God's kingdom will be shaken. Our security is not to be found in wealth, armies, power and nation states, but in God himself. He has been shaking the Marxist world, the Muslim world and now the world of Mammon. God is still active in the affairs of humanity, and that is a sign of hope. The Holy Spirit has been given as a

guarantee, a downpayment, a deposit of things to come, the fulfilment of God's purposes for human history.

2. New spiritual hunger:



Spirituality is in again. Popular spirituality is flowering like shoots springing up through cracks in a dry wilderness impoverished by two centuries of secularisation. Post-modern dissatisfaction with the failure of material progress and scientific achievement to answer the deepest questions about the meaning of life, and post-communist frustration with the bankruptcy of atheistic socialism, have created a generation of Europeans wide open to spiritual exploration-of all sorts.

Yet all too often the Christian God is seen as captive of the traditional church. Yet like Vincent van Gogh, the Dutch artist who rejected the church but remained fascinated with Jesus all through his turbulent life right up to his tragic death, young Europeans are not anti-Jesus. They just don't recognise him dressed in his Sunday-best.

We must view this spiritual hunger itself as a sign of hope-and learn new approaches to evangelism not geared to atheistic secularism, but to post-Christian spirituality. This is a ripe field waiting to be harvested through incarnational mission. Some of my colleagues see seekers queueing for an hour waiting to be prayed for at their stands at Body, Mind, Soul fairs.

3. New prayer initiatives:

The nineties saw many fresh expressions of prayer among Christian believers emerging, including prayer concerts, prayer triplets, prayer walking, prayer marches, 40 day prayer and fasting seasons, 24/7 prayer chains and prayer for the Moslem world during Ramadan.

As the 21st century began, young people took the lead in initiating 24 hour prayer chains for seven days a week in the so-called 24/7 prayer network, spreading contagiously across national and

denominational borders. Prayer for the Muslim world has grown to unprecedented levels globally, and millions of Christians join in prayer during the Ramadan prayer season for revelations of Isa (Jesus) to Muslims around the world.

Global Days of Prayer,



emerging out of Africa and calling Christian everywhere to pray together over Pentecost, have mobilised more Christian simultaneously than ever before in history! Such new and diverse prayer initiatives involving greater numbers than ever before surely must be seen as a prelude of things to come. When God stirs this level of prayer, he must have something in mind.

4. New expressions of church:

A large willow tree used to droop over the stream running down the side of our property. A storm forced a great split between the two main branches and the tree lay broken and forlorn. Council men came and cut off the trunk, leaving an ugly stump. When I asked the men when they would return to pull the stump out, they simply told me to wait in until the spring.

Sure enough, as spring approached, lots of new wispy branches began to appear, carrying green shoots. While the shape of the tree had been altered forever, the spring green curly willow leaves were exactly like the leaves of the tree before the storm.



² according to Operation World, 2010, p75

That tree became my backyard parable of hope concerning the 21st century church. While the church as we have known it in Europe for many centuries may well be in the throes of a long-drawn out terminal sickness, signs of new shoots are emerging.

The Fresh Expressions movement has also emerged out of the Church of England 'stump' encouraging all sorts of new expressions of 'koinonia' initiatives, in pubs, schools, businesses, community centres and so on, parallel to existing parish churches³. Many in other denominations are also working towards a 'church beyond the congregation', a community framework for a lifestyle lived out seven days a week, 24 hours a day, a way of living rather than an event merely attended one day a week.

5. New Europeans: from Africa, Asia and Latin America:

Yet another indication that God is up to something new is that he is bringing to Europe people from Asia, Africa and Latin America with gifts we have lost: gifts of faith for church planting; gifts of boldness in proclamation; gifts of discernment of the spirit of animism, with which they are so familiar. Like the proverbial frog who gets cooked alive in water slowly heated up, we Europeans are being gradually accommodated to the daily barrage of post-Christian 'non-values'. Brothers and sisters coming from the two-thirds world can all too clearly see that Europe is in 'hot water'.

In many European cities, migrant churches have reversed the fall in church attendance. In London, six out of every ten church goers are from migrant backgrounds. A city council survey of Rotterdam carried out by university researchers concluded that churches and Christian volunteers played a crucial role in creating social cohesion and integration in Rotterdam, and saved the city up to €130 million each year in social services. Migrant churches contributed as much as traditional Dutch churches to society, according to the survey. Two out of five church-goers were migrants or migrant

children, while roughly half of all churches were migrant fellowships, using 35 languages next to Dutch.

In Spain, the evangelical population is mostly migrant, with Latin Americans, Africans and Romanians boosting numbers ten-fold in recent years. Argentinians and Brazilians have been arriving in groups to pray for Europe in recent years. Surely it is a sign of hope that God is laying Europe on the hearts of Koreans, Africans and Latin Americans for prayer-and action.

6. New ecumenism of the heart:

A further sign of encouragement is the growth of a climate of unity and cooperation. An ecumenism of the heart-if not of full doctrinal agreement-has emerged in recent years in many European countries.

The Charismatic movement, interdenominational youth organisations, prayer movements, transdenominational conferences and the secularisation of society has promoted an awareness that our common beliefs are greater than our differences. This is true within the Protestant world, between Protestants and Catholics, and even in relations with the Orthodox churches.

Christian leaders are coming together saying we need each other. There has never been a season of such convergence as there is today. Pope Benedict declared in St Peter's Square that 'Luther was right' about the doctrine of justification by faith. Who ever thought a pope would say that? Most recently, Pope Francis and Patriarch Bartholomew of the Eastern Orthodox Church have agreed to call a Council of Nicea in 2025, the 1700th anniversary of the original council which gave us the Apostles' Creed. Leaders of all backgrounds are realising that we must work together. We must find each other across denominational boundaries. We need to pool each others' strengths.

This surely is a sign of hope.

7. Newly recovered Good News of the Kingdom

Lastly, (although this is far from an exhaustive list!), believers are waking up to the holistic nature of the gospel; that the good news of Jesus Christ begins with

salvation but goes on to the culmination of God's purposes for his whole creation.

Personal salvation of course is the starting point of our spiritual walk, as Jesus told Nicodemis - but it's not the end point! It comes as a great surprise for most of us when we discover that Jesus actually said very little about the church. There is one subject however on which he is certainly not silent. That is the Kingdom. It is his opening message: Repent for the Kingdom of God (or heaven) is near. That is the gospel Matthew tells us Jesus began to proclaim, three years before he went to the cross (see Matthew 4: 23). In the Sermon on the Mount, as recorded by Matthew in the following chapters, Jesus refers to the Kingdom in the Beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer, and then tells his listeners to seek God's Kingdom first. In parable after parable, Jesus painstakingly explains truths about the Kingdom. He is obviously trying to get his point across: 'The kingdom of God (heaven) is like...'

Still later he describes the fulfilment of the Great Commission as the preaching of the Kingdom to all nations, the prerequisite for the end to come (Matthew 24:14). And lastly, after rising from the dead, he appears to the disciples on numerous occasions over a period of forty days, and speaks to them - surprise, surprise - about the Kingdom of God (Acts 1:3).

Jesus defines the Kingdom for us in the Lord's Prayer: "May your Kingdom come; in other words, may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven". God's Kingdom is where his will is being done. When God's will is being done in the family, or in the church, or in the school, or in politics, or in business, in healthcare, and every other sphere of life, his Kingdom is advancing.

What this means is that we are all to be Kingdom agents in *every* area of life God calls us to serve him. As Abraham Kuyper famously declared when he opened the Free University in Amsterdam in 1880, 'there is not one square inch of human life where Christ, who is Lord of all, does not say, Mine, Mine, Mine!'

More and more believers are waking up to this truth, and that surely is a sign of hope.



google: incognito, Britains's got talent



³ www.freshexpressions.org.uk