Implementing Human Rights: the Churches' Programme

The Programme

In 1979 the churches in "the Helsinki area" (the area covered by the 35 countries which signed the Helsinki Final Act in 1975) set up a programme with the rather clumsy title "The Churches' Human Rights Programme for the Implementation of the Helsinki Final Act". It was sponsored by three bodies: the Conference of European Churches (CEC), the Canadian Council of Churches (CCC), and the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA (NCCCUSA). A full-time secretary, Dr Theo Tschuy of Switzerland, was appointed in 1980, together with a Working Group of 11 persons from, respectively, Eastern Europe (4), Western Europe (4), Canada (1) and the United States (2). The programme was given a five-year mandate, which was later extended to the end of 1986.

Its aim was to share information, to engage in common study of human rights issues, and to work on serious cases of human rights violations; its method of working was to be in accord with the spirit of "Helsinki". It soon became clear that human rights issues could not be separated from such matters as peace, security, and disarmament. Disagreements as well as agreements were expressed; but the members learned much from one another, and were welded into a unity which did much to bridge the political and ideological gap between East and West.

The Nature and Scope of the Work

Much of the work of the Programme was in the nature of a "reflective process", an examination of the issues of human rights and their violation. This was done by means of consultations, seminars, and "network" meetings held in different parts of Europe and the States. Alongside this theoretical process went a very practical involvement in human rights cases, and this latter occupied an important place on every agenda.

Consultations

In 1981-82 three Consultations were held for the Churches of Northern Europe, North America, and Southern Europe, followed by a general Colloquium in Bucharest. Their aim was to seek clarity on the question of how human rights are related to the whole "Helsinki" process, and to find out from the churches what particular issues within their areas require attention. Thus, the Trieste Consultation (for Southern Europe) pointed to the cultural and social North-South gap within Europe and urged that attention should not be focused simply on the East-West divide. A second issue was the problem of minorities, whose plight often indicated inadequate legislation, socio-economic prejudice, or religious harassment. A third area of concern was the export of arms and of repressive technology, not least in the Mediterranean region, which endangers peace, security, and human rights.

Seminars

In 1984 two Seminars were held, one in Moscow on the question of "confidence-building", and one in Eisenach (GDR) on the vexed question of non-intervention in the inter-

nal affairs of other nations (Principle VI of the Helsinki Final Act) and the universal responsibility for upholding human rights and fundamental freedoms wherever they may be violated (Principle VII). In addition to these seminars, the Programme cooperated with the Protestant Federation of Switzerland in an important Conference on "human contacts", held in Gwatt, Berne, in 1986. The themes of all three meetings were found to be in need of further study and development.

Networks

A whole series of network meetings was held in different parts of Europe to examine the human rights situation there and to encourage direct action. The last of these, held in Miskolc (Hungary), was different from the others in that it concentrated on "Religious Liberty in the Danube Region". It had a strong historical emphasis, but dealt also with church-state relationships today, and raised some practical issues which continue to be sore points in East-West relations. Two recommendations were passed. The first encouraged the Programme to pursue further the topic of religious liberty in other parts of the Helsinki area; the second encouraged the churches to urge state officials, in the words of the Madrid Conference,*

> to take the action necessary to ensure the freedom of the individual to profess and practise, alone or in community with others, religion or belief, acting in accordance with the dictates of his own conscience.

*A Helsinki Review Conference was held in Madrid between 1980 and 1983 — *Ed.*

Human Rights Cases

In addition to many individual cases of human rights violations (more often than not of a religious kind), a whole variety of corporate cases were dealt with: religious liberty in Greece, ethnic Germans and Hungarians in Romania, alleged assimilation of religious and ethnic minorities in the USSR, alleged police torture in Spain, community rights of gypsies in Switzerland, asylum practice and the sanctuary movement in the USA. It is hoped that, where appropriate, team visits will be paid to a number of these countries to clarify and help to alleviate the situation.

Future Work

At its Assembly meeting in Stirling in September, the CEC agreed to continue the work of the Programme in a new setting and with a new title: "Peace, Justice, and Human Rights". The new secretariat and programme, it is hoped, will be in operation by the spring of 1987 and will include, *inter alia*, the establishment of a common basis for church action across political and ideological frontiers and for the monitoring and follow-up of the "Helsinki" process in close association with the CCC and the NCCCUSA.

Assessment

On the negative side, the results have been limited for several reasons. The first arises out of the very nature of the Group itself and its agreed method of working: before any action could be taken on any "case", the wishes and reactions of the church or churches in the country concerned had to be considered. This was made all the more difficult when no reply was received to letters, or where there was reason to believe that there was prevarication, or

where the church may have been acting under duress.

A second reason lies in the confidential nature of the work itself and the decision to act with diplomacy, avoiding confrontation. This did not mean, however, that "valour" was necessarily sacrificed at the expense of "discretion" (to use the words of Trevor Beeson's book*). These are surely complementary concepts, not opposites. As an Orthodox Bishop once put it; "The kiss on both cheeks should be accompanied by some very hard questions". The Group followed this advice.

A third limitation, some would judge, is the less-than-prominent place given to the theme of religious liberty. It is true that this was indeed the topic at Miskolc and that many of the "cases" were of this kind. But it is to be hoped that more attention will be given to this aspect of human rights in the days ahead.

On the positive side, perhaps the greatest achievement has been the growth of the Working Group itself into a unity, despite the ideological, political, and economic divisions represented amongst its members. Differences of judgement remained, but agreements were reached which went far beyond those recorded in the United Nations or the Helsinki Final Act, and these were passed on to the governments concerned.

One of the Programme's most important contributions has been to underline the need for confidence-building. Eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation will only lead to the exacerbation of an already highly dangerous situation. Confidence-building is to be clearly distinguished from appeasement. It will include plain talking, but will avoid using human rights issues simply to score points off an opponent.

Another emphasis has been on the indivisibility of human rights — which are for the whole person within a just and peaceful society, and are the equal rights of all. The new CEC Programme, it would appear, has this broad setting very much in mind.

By its very nature, the "reflective process" which characterised the Programme does not show quick or dramatic results. But its careful examination of "causes" and not only "cases" makes a valuable contribution to the thinking of the churches and may even have its effect on government policy. The results arising from consideration of individual cases may have been limited, but attention has been focused on a whole variety of violations which cry out for speedy remedy.

Modest though the results of the Programme may have been, its members have worked long and hard at what they regard as vital issues, and offer their work as a contribution to the cause of justice and our common humanity.

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*Trevor Beeson, *Discretion and Valour*, (Revised Edition; Collins, Fount Paperbacks: London, 1982).

Christians and the Wall

The churches did not pass over 13 August 1986 (the twenty-fifth anniversary of the building of the Berlin Wall) in silence.

The Roman Catholic Church has never adjusted its diocesan bound-