The Story of *The 1997 Prague Declaration …*
… and Some Personal Reflections

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I have been asked to say a little about the history of the Prague Declaration so that we have a background to our discussions of the coming few days. I wrote a piece about this in the latest EurECA Newsletter and I will be covering some of that again and adding some additional information. I will also include some personal reflections on the Declaration from the perspective of ten years on from our work in Prague.

I think it is important to note that we deliberately entitled the statement as 'The 1997 Prague Declaration". This was because we recognised that we are in a changing world and we were not making timeless statements but rather statements at a particular time and in a particular place.

Ten years ago, in May 1997, thirty seven Christian educators from fifteen countries met together for a EurECA Working Conference to agree a statement to be published as the 1997 Prague Declaration on Christian Belief and Education.

Four came from Germany, two from Norway and two from Croatia. There were three from Poland and four from Hungary. Two came from Russia, three from Ukraine and one from Romania. There was one from each of Spain, France and Belgium and three from the Netherlands. And two came from Scotland and six from England. And we were also joined by two from a long way outside Europe – they came from South Africa.

We all came together at a teacher training college near Prague known as St. John-Under-the-Rock. As you can see from the slide picture, there is a rocky hill towering right above the college. This is what gave the place the name of 'St. John-under-the-Rock'. On the top of the rock, there is a cross and if you focus very hard on that cross, you will see …

… John-on-the-Rock! Sorry to shock you with the sight of that muscular young man … so soon after your evening meal! It is not my intention to draw attention away from the corss but simply that these are the only two pictures that I could find from the conference!

The process had begun several months earlier when Christian educators in each of four regions of Europe developed their own drafts of possible contents of the statement. Each area co-ordinator then submitted their draft documents to me …

… and I had the unenviable task of assimilating these four documents into a single statement which became the working document for the conference. The four draft documents contained a true wealth of material. However, they were all quite different from one another in format, style and in some of their emphases. Some were written more for a Christian audience and some for a more general audience. This meant that the working document inevitably seemed to some to bear very little resemblance to their draft! I tried to reassure all that their key points had all been included and I hope that they were convinced.

Dr George Durance (then Director of Black Forest Academy in Kandern, Germany and now President of Aliance University College in Calgary, Canada) chaired the conference very expertly and graciously. We all worked hard under George's leadership in small working groups and in plenary discussions. We often worked into the late evening, as we sought to focus on what we could agree upon and to negotiate our differences.

Because the final statement was to be translated into a number of different European languages, it was important that every delegate clearly understood the terms being used in it. We became aware of linguistic and cultural differences even in our understandings of the word 'education' and of the phrase 'Christian education'. (For some, it was curriculum content that made education Christian; for others, it was more a matter of school ethos and classroom approaches; for others, it was a matter of who was doing the educating; and for still others, it was mainly to do with who was being educated!) What appeared straightforward and obvious to some was by no means so to others.

Trevor Cooling and I had the task of re-writing and re-formatting the statement as the discussions progressed.

It was wonderful at the end to arrive at a declaration that all present could positively and wholeheartedly affirm and we did so with a sense of deep thanksgiving to the Lord and with the prayer that He would bless and use the statement.

The 1997 Prague Declaration was born! After we all returned home, work began on translating the statement from English into German and French and a number of other European languages and then on printing and publishing these across Europe. We had received a grant of 4,000 GBP (about 6,000 euros) from a Christian trust in England to help with travel costs for some of the conference delegates and with the task of translating and publishing the Declaration.

These are the translations that I know about (Czech, French, German, Hungarian, Polish, Romanian, Russian and Spanish). If you know of others, please let us know. Perhaps you may yourself be able to work with others in translating the Declaration into the language of your country if it is not listed here!

At the time, we probably did not realise how much easier this would become more recently as access to the internet has became easier and more commonplace. We now have the Czech, English, French, German, Hungarian, Polish and Romanian translations on the EurECA website and Russian and Spanish will follow very shortly.

You may have noticed how often the phrase 'We affirm …' appears in the Declaration. We were concerned to accentuate the positive and the ideal rather than to declaim the respects in which we fall short of it, i.e. to affirm rather than to deny, in the belief that light shines out in darkness. Telling the darkness that it is dark does not dispel it!

I have been re-reading what we formulated ten years ago to see what things strike me now at this distance away from the original time and context. Here are some of them.

Reading through the document, there are few aspects of faith and education that I can think of that are not dealt with in it. I think the Declaration scores highly on this.

I think we did well in our efforts to make what we had to say relevant to the context of a changing Europe. I am not sure that we anticipated how influential Islam would become in the decade to follow but, even if we had, would this have led us to say anything different? Perhaps issues to do with pluralism and tolerance would have received more detailed attention.

There are explicit references to foundations and, in the way the whole statement is constructed, there seems to be an implicit assumption that the right way of proceeding is first to formulate theory and then work it out in practice. I suspect that, if we were starting again now, we might make more of the dynamic inter-relationship between what we call 'theory' and what we call 'practice'.

This is linked with the previous point. I wonder whether the proper emphasis on biblical principles of the Declaration should not have been supplemented by a recognition that there are also other ways through which the Bible shapes our classroom teaching, e.g. metaphor, narrative, models?

The importance of caring for the environment is recognised in the statement but, again, I wonder whether, if we were starting from scratch now, we would not give this a more central place.

Dr Francis Schaeffer was way ahead of his time when, at the end of the 1960s, he wrote a little book entitled 'Pollution and the Death of Man'. I wonder whether, in 1997, we were not a little behind the time in apparently not realising how important these issues were to become across the globe.

This emphasis is present throughout (and explicitly so in section B3.2.1) and, as such, is both biblical and contemporary for these early years of the new century.

Finally, in re-reading the Declaration, I am also struck by a distinct anti-hierarchical thread running through it accompanied by a call to concern for the poor and marginalised. This too is surely biblical and needed today as much as ever.

Well, these are some of the things that have struck me. You may well find that other things stand out for you. We look forward to hearing what you have to say about this ten-year-old statement and what you think we should be saying to European educators today. Thank you.

John Shortt
EurECA Travelling Secretary, 18 May 2007