

## EUROPE TODAY: ENGAGING THE PRESENT

### Session 9: Signs of hope in Europe today

*Seven signs of hope that God is up to something new in Europe.*

#### 1. The shakings of God

NOTHING IS PERMANENT. The break-up of the hated Berlin Wall and the awful collapse of the World Trade Centre in New York should remind us of this for the rest of our lives.

As we face up to present seemingly permanent realities, such images remind us that all created things will be shaken. **Marxism, Islam, the capitalist world ...** all will be shaken. *Only that which is unshakable, God's kingdom, will remain (Hebrews 12: 27).*

The decade of the nineties was ushered in by dramatic shakings in the **Marxist world**. Answers to prayers we hardly dared to believe for came in an avalanche of change. The Gulf War was seen by many observers a part of a series of shakings in the Muslim world. Even the terrifying WTC attack reminded us that western materialism was not immune to shakings. I do not mean to imply that God was the ultimate cause of the terrible events of 11 September, but he does use crooked sticks to hit straight.

The first decade of the new millennium saw dramatic shakings of the western capitalist world.

Today we are seeing the shakings of the Muslim world.

*Victor Hasweh:*

The dramatic changes sweeping the Arab world today and spilling over to Europe calls for a fresh look at the whole issue of Muslim evangelism.

- In the last 20 years, more Muslims within the Arab world have become followers of Christ than throughout 1400 years combined
- More Muslims have reported seeing visions and dreams than ever before in both the Arab world and Europe.
- More people have been accessing the Bible and Christian websites than ever before.
- More Muslim writers have been vocal about their criticism of Islam than ever before (book: 'Twilight of the Islamic World', 'The God who hates').
- For the first time, the Quran has been seriously subjected to verse by verse textual criticism ('Zakariah Botros', Dilemma of the Quran).
- For the first time, Christian TV has been broadcasting to the Arab world and Europe on Nilesat, not only Hotbird.
- As we see from the above, God has been involved in reaching out to Muslims through many and various ways. Additionally, more people have reported hunger for God than ever before (e.g. 'Kamal' of Algeria).
- More Muslims have been asking serious questions about the eternal perspective of life than ever before (e.g. Dr. Ihab).

Our world is being shaken in new ways, and we are being reminded that despite the appearance of things, nothing is permanent. Only that which is based on the kingdom of God will survive the shakings, Jesus warned.

Jesus talked of upheavals and shakings as birth pangs of the new order<sup>1</sup>. Even in the midst of tragedy and horror, we can detect the God of Hope at work doing the unexpected. Despite the grim realities we looked at in our last chapter, God is still the God of Hope, and still specialises in doing the unexpected.

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<sup>1</sup>Matthew 24:

## 2. *New spiritual hunger*

God is turning up in Europe again - in some surprising places, proclaimed the European edition of TIME magazine in June 2003. 'It may sound strange to say, but in some ways Europe's faith has survived the church,' continued TIME. 'While the continent may be more secular than ever, God hasn't gone away for everyone... In all but a handful of countries, more than two-thirds of people believe in God.'

What then are some of these surprising places where God is turning up? TIME suggests God has '*gone private*'. The separation of church and state, proposed by Anabaptists in the sixteenth century and enshrined in the American Constitution in the eighteenth, is being seriously considered in those last bastions of establishmentarianism such as England and Norway. Citizens, like states, are rethinking their relationships with clergy and fashioning their own relationships with God - from France to Russia. A French theologian is quoted as predicting that 'at the end of this path will open a new age of Christianity.' Truth is, suggests TIME, it may already have begun. Galina, a Moscow translator, confesses that when she goes to her Orthodox church, she avoids making eye contact with the clergy - whom most Russians mistrust: 'the important thing for me is to have God in my heart.'

Traditional services, with the 'hard pews and the drone of the sermons', are described in the report with adjectives like 'bureaucratic', 'obsolete' and 'irrelevant'. Interactive celebrations and studies, where questions are welcomed, are burgeoning across the Nordic region, and via the Alpha course have spread to thirty-eight countries in Europe. Alpha's founder, Nicky Gumbel explains: 'Our society has changed. We don't need to change the message but we need to change the way we put it across.' Reports of YWAM's Impact World Tour events, with break-dancing, skateboarding, trick-cycling, fire-dancing and power displays could have illustrated this category further.

An unexpected rejuvenation of Christianity was under way among European youth, claimed the article. 'An increase in religion among youth is very clear,' stated a French sociologist. Significant increases among youthful believers were cited in Denmark, Italy and even France. The village of Taizé in Burgundy continued to attract 100,000 primarily young people each year on an ecumenical pilgrimage. A Swedish bishop was shocked to find himself accompanied by 500 youth on a recent five-day pilgrimage. In Berlin, youth comprised forty percent of the 200,000 gathering for an Ecumenical Church Day in spring 2003 - prompting theologian Hans Küng to assert: 'This is not the end of Christianity at all. When 7000 attended (a workshop) just to hear me answer the question, *Why be a Christian today?* you cannot be a pessimist. I have hope. Even in The Netherlands, notorious for its soft-drugs, abortion, euthanasia and same-sex marriage policies, 32,000 young people flocked to Arnhem's Gelredome sports complex the same week as the TIME article appeared, for the annual EO Jongerendag, backing up traffic through the city and creating motorway jams!

TIME also noted what the trend we identified in the earlier chapter: 'God' had gone alternative. People were defining their own belief systems and mixing in alternative spirituality. While many may be rediscovering spirituality, they are not necessarily returning to the church or sticking to its tenets, continued the report. In a post-modern age of mix-and-match, this renewed interest in spirituality can get fuzzy around the edges, borrowing from Buddhism, Hinduism and other sources in a form of 'a la carte' Christianity. The concern of many church leaders was expressed in the report by Godfried Cardinal Danneels, the Archbishop of Brussels and Mechelen: 'The church needs to get to know modern culture. But it's a mistake to think we should try to attract more people by diluting our message.'

So after a century in which marxist materialism in Eastern Europe attempted to brutalise belief in God out of existence, and in the west consumer materialism

claimed to have rendered the Creator irrelevant, spirituality is in again. As John Drane puts it, the overt search for spiritual meaning has never been more intense than it is now.<sup>2</sup> Whether expressed through the unpredictable revival of Gregorian chant music (the cd '*Canto Gregoriano*' made by monks in a small monastery in northern Spain sold over four million copies), or through the spiritual quest of scientists exploring the boundaries of quantum mechanics, 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.

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 suicide, 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.

### 3. *Stirrings in prayer*

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

*March for Jesus* began in London City and spread throughout Britain, across into Europe and then throughout the world, eventually climaxing on June 25, 1994, in the biggest prayer meeting in history involving many millions simultaneously.

During the nineties, thousands enthusiastically responded to calls to *pray and fast*, including many young Europeans who fasted for up to forty days.

*Prayer triplets*, based on the promise that whenever two or three believers pray in the his will, the Father will answer, brought believers across Europe together in threes, each bringing three other names to pray for.

Reviving the concept of *prayer concerts* that emerged in the eighteenth century during the Great Awakening in America, believers from different churches and streams in one location gathered for concerted prayer for each other, for their town or city, for their country and for the world.

As the twenty-first century began, young people took the lead in initiating twenty-four 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 grew to unprecedented levels globally as the nineties progressed, and millions of Christians joined in prayer during the *Ramadan prayer season* for revelations of Isa (Jesus) to Muslims around the world.

Such new and diverse prayer initiatives involving greater numbers than ever before surely must be seen as a prelude of things to come.

### 4. *Fresh expressions of church*

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<sup>2</sup>see *The McDonaldization of the Church*, Drane rane

United prayer has brought leaders to ask the question: how can we concretely pray for our nation? and for Europe as a whole? What do we mean by the re-evangelisation of the European nations? More mass campaigns? More street evangelism? More evangelism via the media?

Part of the answer surfaced early in the nineties with new vision for church planting. The DAWN vision (Discipling A Whole Nation) caught on in a number of European nations as leaders realised that, until we plant a fellowship of believers, a witnessing fellowship, into every neighbourhood in every European country, we have not given every European a chance to see and hear the gospel.

The first time I remember someone conducting a spot survey asking a group of believers how many had come to faith primarily through mass evangelism, a mere sprinkling of hands responded. Through street evangelism? radio or television evangelism? literature evangelism? church visitation? door to door evangelism? Still only a few scattered hands were raised each time.

When it was asked how many had become believers primarily through the influence of a friend or relative, a whole forest of hands suddenly shot up!

What does that mean? Of course, we need evangelists like Billy Graham, Luis Palau and Ulrich Parzany, and mass evangelistic initiatives like Impact World Tour. And we need street evangelists, effective literature evangelism and creative evangelism through television and radio. Yet I'm convinced that the vast majority of people are reached through ordinary, faithful believers going about their daily lives!

This means communities of believers need to be established in every neighbourhood to give everyone the chance to rub shoulders with and to interact with believers. In other words, there is no substitute for saturation church planting as an evangelistic strategy.

From that moment on, I saw the task of the re-evangelisation of Europe in a whole new way. In every nation we needed to see a church planting movement, denominations working together towards the goal of saturation church planting. The 'rule of thumb' suggested by the DAWN movement is one fellowship for every thousand people...in every European nation. That would mean 16,000 fellowships for the Netherlands, more than double the present total of congregations, protestant and catholic, liberal and evangelical. Possibly ten thousand new fellowships would be needed in Holland alone!!

In the nineties, the vision for church planting took root among denominational leaders in many European countries - truly a sign of hope that God was up to something new. In England, the DAWN vision influenced every protestant denomination. Ambitious goals were set for 20,000 new fellowships to be planted by the year 2000. At mid-decade, however, new questions began to be asked. Even if these goals were reached, would England be effectively reached? or would the new churches simply be clones of existing churches, reflecting sub-cultures people had already walked away from? What sort of churches would effectively reach England's unchurched?

As the new century approached, church attendance in mainstream Christendom across western Europe continued to wane. Some smaller denominations, particularly pentecostal, bravely showed signs of growth. Others were bold enough to ask out loud, what actually is the church? and how should it look in the twenty-first century? how relevant are forms that developed in the pre-modern or modern eras for today?

Younger leaders began experimenting with non-traditional expressions of church. An awareness of networks of youth congregations developing across the continent led to the E-merge gathering of several thousand young Europeans in Frankfurt in the summer of 2001.

The Alpha phenomenon surfaced in England early in the nineties, jumped across the channel to the continent, taking root in most unexpected, conservative circles. Alpha groups introduced the New Testament concept of *koinoni*-based

meeting, often in homes and around meals. Many who came to faith through Alpha courses were now hungry for fellowship-based church models, and did not easily make the transition to the existing churches. Seminars introducing cell churches and house churches were attended eagerly by many dissatisfied with old models.

Voices arguing passionately for a revitalisation of worship explored internet links and multi-media possibilities to create an 'alternative worship' movement merging the radical with the traditional, the old with the contemporary.

Yet others dreamed of a church beyond the congregation, a community framework for a lifestyle lived out seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day, a way of living rather than an event attended one day a week.

A godly dissatisfaction seemed to be driving the search for something new, something related to the post-modern world, that sought to transform culture rather than to withdraw from it. This honest quest for a church for the twenty-first century is also a sign of hope.

### ***5. Look who's coming to Europe***

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. I suspect God is sending us these messengers to wake us up out of our Enlightenment-induced stupor. 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'.

Ugandan pastor John Mulinde, for example, is a man with a prophetic message for Europe. He promoted a prayer movement in Uganda which has helped turn that calamity-stricken nation around to become the first nation where AIDS is now on the decrease. As Mulinde travels through Europe, he releases gifts of faith among Europeans that prayer really changes things. He tells of Ugandan congregations who are fasting and praying for revival here in Europe!

African friends of mine called to work in Europe as missionaries have organised themselves as GATE - *Gospel from Africa To Europe*.

A Nigerian pastor played a leading role in the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine, which saw the fall of the old corrupt leadership in Kiev in the opening days of 2005. Sunday Adelaja came to the Ukraine after studying journalism in Belarus. For five years he led his fellowship in prayer for revival in Europe, often from 11pm to 6am. Adelaja became pastor of one of the biggest churches in Europe, peaking at 25,000 members. Hundreds of not thousands of these members prayed every day on the streets and supported the opposition candidate Victor Yushchenko, who later became president.

Some of the largest churches in Amsterdam are also pastored by Ghanaians and Nigerians - in the Bijlmer district, where, because the city planners designed no church buildings at all, believers gathered in parking garages until they were recently granted a large new church building facility to use.

If we Europeans don't have the faith for our own continent's future, these two-third worlders certainly seem to. Argentinians and Brazilians have been arriving in groups to pray for Europe in recent years. Latin Americans have become popular conference speakers teaching from their experience of city-wide revivals, and have specifically blessed us in YWAM. I met a Guatemalan heading up a theological seminary in Moscow. Brazilian YWAMers (JUCUMeros) can be found in several European locations from Moscow to Portugal, especially in pioneering situations like Albania and Kosovo.

The TIME report also confirmed that God was turning up among the immigrants of Europe. Under the heading 'Saving the Prodigal Parent', missionaries from the developing world are reported to be 'doing their best to shore up the foundations of European Christianity'. From nations like South Korea, Brazil and Uganda where Christianity is thriving, immigrants to Europe are often shocked by the lack of passion among Europe's Christians. At the same time, these immigrant missionaries see their work as a gesture of thanks to Europeans for bringing the gospel to their countries in past times. 'Before they came, we were worshipping trees and demons,' said an Ugandan pastor now working in Birmingham, England. More missionaries are on the way from these and other countries, and TIME suggests that European immigration officials may have to create a new visa category, distinct from that of asylum seekers: *soul seekers!*

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. *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 total doctrinal agreement - has emerged over the past decade in many European countries, often promoted by a generation of leaders who worked shoulder to shoulder in inter-denominational youth organisations with colleagues from other denominations.

In England, for example, Spring Harvest came out of the Youth for Christ stable to lay a significant foundation for relationship development and teaching across traditional barriers. Of course, the charismatic movement also brought a recognition that the Holy Spirit was no respecter of denominationalism.

Even in Holland (where it used to be said: '*one Dutchman, a theologian; two Dutchmen, a congregation; three Dutchmen, a split...*') the nineties saw partnership developing on many fronts, particularly fostered by the Evangelical Alliance, Agape (Campus Crusade), YWAM, the Evangelical Broadcasting Company (EO) and others.

The March for Jesus promoted unity powerfully by encouraging churches everywhere to do something very simple that almost everybody could do: walk together and pray together.

Once more, the Alpha courses are one of the most effective agents promoting this ecumenism of the heart. In towns and cities across Europe, believers meeting together around a meal in private homes or restaurants or halls build relational matrices that cross denominational borders and promote a solidarity among God's people in that locality.

In our own neighbourhood in Holland, Romkje held the first Alpha groups in our living room, after we visited Holy Trinity Brompton in London. Less than half a dozen groups were active in the whole nation. Now Alpha groups have since spread to almost every church in our town, and seven hundred nationally. The result is an unprecedented *ecumenism of the heart*.

In Austria, traditionally a conservative bulwark of Catholicism where evangelicals were barely tolerated as 'sects', a roundtable has emerged in which Pentecostal, Evangelical, Lutheran, and Reformed leaders regularly convene in a spirit of respect and unity not only with each other but also with top Catholic leaders in the country, in honest dialogue and in a recognition that the ground of their unity is Jesus Christ alone.

In 2004, a new initiative emerged as an expression of this ecumenism of the heart. The debate about the role of God in the new constitution of the European Union brought believers together from different traditions, Catholic, protestant and even Orthodox, to celebrate our common Christian heritage. Under the

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banner of *Together for Europe*, ten thousand believers converged on Stuttgart, to be linked by satellite to other a hundred other European centres, in perhaps one of the largest expressions of an ecumenism of the heart ever.

When Christian leaders come together in recognition of their need for each other, it is a sign of hope. In a later chapter we'll examine this further and share vision on what could happen in Europe if this ecumenism of the heart continued to spread.

But for now, let's recognise God at work.

The shakings of God, new spiritual hunger, new creative prayer initiatives, new vision for fellowships, new waves of Africans, Asians and South Americans bringing new hope to Europe, new ecumenism of the heart, and impulses of the Spirit towards reconciliation – surely these are signs of the divine intention for a new dawn, a hopeful future!

***7. Recovery of the Gospel of the Kingdom***

There is yet another significant hopeful sign – growing awareness that the good news involves more than merely securing one's ticket to heaven, important as that may be. For all too often, our understanding of the Christian message could be summed up in the title of the popular film: *'Honey, I shrunk the kids!'*

For, honey, we shrunk the gospel!

*There is not one square inch of the whole territory of our human lives over which Jesus, who is sovereign over all, does not say, Mine!*

Abraham Kuyper