

HEARTBEAT OF GOD FOR EUROPE

Daniel Chae

The Church of Christ is growing all around the world, including the Middle East. There is one continent, however, where the Church is not growing. It is Europe! Furthermore, Europe's churches have experienced a rapid decline in the last half a century. Over ten thousand churches have been closed down in the UK alone. Europe was the birthplace of the Reformation, of the Great Revivals, of Puritanism and of modern theologies. The modern missionary movement started with William Carey in the United Kingdom. Europe has been the centre of Christendom for the last 1500 years. Today Europe, however, is very different. It is no longer a Christian continent. **Europe, once a main force for mission, has now become a mission field!**

A. EUROPE, A SERIOUS MISSION FIELD

1. Many Europeans do not go to church

According to one recent survey, called "The European Spiritual Estimate," only 4.2% of Europeans believe that Jesus is the Lord and Saviour, even though 72.2% claimed that they were Christians. Only some 3% of Europeans attend Protestant church services. One third of the 35,000 churches in Germany are facing the prospect of closure. Some 60 years ago 96% of the French people attended Mass at Catholic churches. But only 6% attend Mass today. The Protestant population is around 2%, and the evangelicals in France are 0.6% today. Among 47 European countries, 19 have population where evangelicals are less than 1%. In fact, Europe has the lowest proportion of evangelicals in the world: in North America it is 26.8%, in Africa 17.7%, in Latin America 16.7%, in Asia 3.5%, but in Europe only 2.5%! (Operation World, 2010)

2. Europe has become a secular society

Owing to the Enlightenment Movement in the 17th and 18th centuries, Europe has become a secular and atheistic region. A global inquiry, showing peoples beliefs and values was recently published by the Pew Forum. Question 42 of the Pew Global Attitude Project was: "How important is religion for you?"

Those who replied, "Religion is very important in my life" were as follows:

Senegal 98 %, Indonesia 95 %, Brazil 78 %, India 74 %, USA 57 %.

But for the Europeans, the corresponding figures drop considerably.

Poland 33 %, Germany 25 %, Britain 19 %, Hungary 15 %, Sweden 8 %!

This shows that a majority of Europeans are not interested in religion. Dramatic changes are happening in Europe. As the missionary theologian Bishop Lesslie

Newbegin pointed out, Christianity is perceived as a religion which is no longer attractive to Europeans. **In Europe the Christian gospel is not perceived as good news, but a religious ideal that has been tried and found false.**

B. SOME SNAP-SHOTS OF CHURCHES IN EUROPE (with special reference to the UK)

1. Decline in Church Membership and Attendance

According to the 2001 Census in the UK, 72% claimed to be Christians, but at the same time 66% answered that they did not go to church. A later census in 2006 showed that one half of Christians in the UK left the church between 1979 and 2005. Now only about 5% of the British population go to church on a regular basis.

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The Pentecostals grew by 22% between 1989 and 2005, and are still growing, which is very encouraging. The ethnic minority churches in the UK are also growing. There are growing churches and some churches are being planted. Nevertheless, it is the general trend that the church is in decline across the major denominations—the Catholics by 49%, the Methodists by 44%, the Anglicans by 31% decline.

All of England, except London and two nearby counties, experienced more than 10% decline in church attendance between 1989 and 1998. The sad fact is that churches do not only fail to win the non-Christians; they fail to keep their own members. As result, some 9000 churches have been closed down between 1980 and 2009.

That's why the then Archbishop of Canterbury Dr George Carey said, "*The Church is bleeding to death*" at the WCC Congress in Zimbabwe in December 1998. That's why Dr Peter Brierley, then Executive Director of Christian Research in London reported in April 2000 that if the current trend continues, "*Church Will Be Dead in 40 Years Time.*"

The closed church buildings have been sold for various purposes. Many former places of Christian worship are now used as offices, warehouses, theatres, supermarkets,

houses, discotheques, cinemas, restaurants and pubs. In the city of Leicester, England, where there is a large South Asian community, some huge church buildings have been turned into the likes of a Jain temple, a Sikh temple, a Hindu broadcasting station, and Muslim mosques. The UK is a nation which believes in the preservation of the past. So the outside facades are kept up as historic church buildings, but inside they are no longer places of Christian worship. It is a very sad situation in the UK at the moment where the physical dwelling place of God has been taken over by those who worship false gods; and where God is also not honoured in the spiritual dwelling place of people's hearts.

2. Decline in the Number of Clergy

The number of Anglican clergy in the UK in 1975 was 15,911, but had been reduced to 13,920 by 1992, and then by 2009 down to 8,400. The Anglican Church expects they will have 7,700 in 2013. On that basis they would have 22.5% less clergy members than in 2000. They also forecast that a further 20% will retire in the next 5 years. If this trend continues for 50 years there would be no single clergy who receives stipend.

The general trend is similar for other denominations as well. That's why the number of the remaining churches is higher than the number of ordained clergy in the UK. Many clergy in the rural areas look after 3-5 churches, or even 7-8!

Some Bible colleges in the UK have been closed down, or are shrinking due to problems with finance and depleting numbers.

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3. Decline among the Next Generation

The UK is an ageing population. Now about a third of Christians in the UK are over 65 years old. The church attendance of the young people has declined rapidly. In 1989 14% of the under-15 year-olds attended churches, but in 1998 only 8%. 67% of those who left the church in the 1980s were under 20 years old, and this was still the case for 55% of leavers in the 1990s.

C. THE ADVANCE OF ISLAM TO EUROPE

The mandate for the re-evangelisation of Europe needs to be considered in the light of the growth of other religions in Europe. According to the Pew Forum's report, "Mapping the Global Muslim Population", published in October 2009, there are 38 million Muslims in Europe. This is 5% of the European population. It seems insignificant. But it is not, because it shows that Islam has grown 300% in the last 30 years.

Muslims represent nearly 10% of the population in France; 6% in Holland, 5% in Austria, 4.9% in Germany, 4.3% in Switzerland, 4% in Belgium and 3% in the UK. The Muslim population is found in the large European cities. They represent 25% in Marseille and Rotterdam, 20% in Malmo, 15% in Brussels and Birmingham, and 10% in Paris, London and Copenhagen.

If the current trend continues, the Muslim population would grow to about 16% in Europe. More than one half of the new born babies in Holland are Muslims. The name 'Muhammad' became the most popular name in the UK in 2009, as 7,549 new born boys were given that name. So it is in Holland in its four major cities.

On 30 January 2009, The Times, one of the most prestigious newspapers in the UK, reported on the increase of the Muslim population in the UK with the headline, "Muslim population 'rising 10 times faster than rest of society'". Here is an excerpt from the article.

"The Muslim population in Britain has grown by more than 500,000 to 2.4 million in just four years (2004-2008), according to official research collated for The Times.

The population multiplied 10 times faster than the rest of society, the research by the Office for National Statistics reveals. In the same period the number of Christians in the country fell by more than 2 million."

"..... while the biggest Christian population is among the over-70s bracket, for Muslims it is the under-4s."

"Muhammad Abdul Bari, general secretary of the Muslim Council of Britain, predicted that the number of mosques in Britain would multiply from the present 1,600 in line with the rising Islamic population. He said the greater platform that Muslims would command in the future should not be perceived as a threat to the rest of society."

The Muslims who are now only 3% of the UK population avow that they would "command" Britain in the future, and pursue their vision and goal. What then is the vision for the Christians for Britain and Europe?

D. OUR VISION FOR A CHURCH PLANTING SCHOOL

We must long to see hearts turn back to God; for God's name to be glorified and honoured once again in Europe; and churches to be filled with worship and songs of praise. The church can be rebuilt and reestablished in Europe once again. We must call upon the wider church family to pray for Europe by letting the world know that Europe is a serious mission field and in desperate need of a revival. A European Christian leader appealed to the mission leaders from the non-West, "Why don't you

pray for Europe whilst Europe is still on the map?" We need to support the Bible colleges in Europe by sending students or by twinning them. We need to supply Christian workers and pastors to the European churches where there are no ministers. About 15% of the Catholic churches in Germany are served by African priests.

But the best strategy still is to train the church planters and to plant many churches in Europe. **The best way to make the mountains green again when many old trees die is to plant many new trees and cultivate them well.** There is an urgent need for training in evangelism, church planting, church growth and pastoral work. "Church planting was fundamental to the apostolic strategy for reaching the world with the gospel." (Rob Warner, 21st Century Church, 217) We must plant new trees and pray that they will find good soil so that their roots can grow deep in the knowledge and love of God.

Amnos Ministries is an exciting project that is committed to the re-evangelisation of the UK and Europe by equipping church planters and pastors as well as by raising the awareness of and prayer support for Europe. We are planning to open Amnos Church Planting School in October 2011 with 20 British/European students. This is a one-calendar-year course, including internship at healthy churches overseas or in the UK for three months. Our focus is to provide the students with practical training in evangelism and pastoral work as well as spiritual and character training.

Furthermore, our students will carry out regular, continuous and prayerful outreach twice a week during the Course. We will be working closely with local churches to facilitate and support their church planting endeavour. In so doing, we aim to establish a few new congregations and to strengthen small churches. The overall aim is to equip and enable each graduate to plant a church after the Course. As we train more students we pray that they would plant 20-50 churches a year.

Will you partner with us as our friend, prayer partner or supporter? Will you please pray for this new venture? Will you come to train our students for a few weeks? Your partnership will make a difference.

E. THE HEARTBEAT OF GOD FOR EUROPE

I believe and trust that our project will be successful by God's grace. Not because we have capable trainers, or good strategies or even sufficient finance, but because I hear the heartbeat of God. How sad the Lord must have been when he saw the tens of thousands of churches being closed down in Europe? Whoever attempts to rebuild God's Church in Europe and to restore the honour of the name of the Lord Jesus, I believe, the Lord will help. Yes, he will accomplish this with us and through us, just as if he had been waiting for someone to work with! So success is not dependent on US nor our resources, but on HIM who is so keen to rebuild and restore as we read in Isa 58:12.

*"Your people will **rebuild** the ancient **ruins** and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called*

Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings." (Isa 58:12)

I am convinced that God has a heart for Europe in our days. I have seen it and heard his heartbeat. That was at the 2010 Tokyo Missionary Conference. It was a very meaningful conference as it was the centenary celebration of the first missionary conference in 1910 in Edinburgh, UK.

Over 1000 missionary leaders came from 100 countries for a four-day consultation in May 2010. There were many messages preached, and many ministries introduced and many regional reports presented. But there was one occasion, just one, when the entire congregation stood up and raised our hands and voices in prayer. Many prayed in tears. We really prayed.

That was just after Stefan Gustavsson, General Secretary of the Evangelical Alliance in Sweden, presented a plenary paper on Europe. To me it was special. The fact that this was the only occasion we prayed so sincerely impressed itself upon me. This was not an ordinary mission conference. On the one hand we were there to look back for the last 100 years and to give thanks to God. On the other hand we were there to seek the Lord's will to set up the strategy for the coming 100 years. Then the Lord Jesus showed his heart for Europe.

We thank God for Europe for their missionary work over the centuries. We must thank Europe and comfort them. We also need to help them as they now ask us for the first time after 2000 years, "Come over once again and help us" (Acts 16:6-10). God loves the people in Europe, including millions of immigrants who could hardly hear the gospel freely in their own native countries.

God is looking for men and women who would 'stand before [him] in the gap on behalf of the land so [he] would not destroy it' (Ezk 22:30). God has raised up some churches and ministries to focus on church planting and training church planters. Let's plant many small trees in Europe, and cultivate them well. Let's get involved in Rebuilding, Raising up, Repairing, and Restoring God's church in Europe for the glory of our Lord.
(PTL)

- This paper was delivered at NAMS Church Planting Conference on April 5, 2011 .



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