



BWA Gathering 2018 / Commission on Baptist Heritage and Identity

Friday July 6th 2PM to 4PM

THE WORK OF THE SWISS BAPTIST UNION IN THE 21ST CENTURY BY STEFAN GISIGER

Members of the Commission on Baptist Heritage and Identity of the BWA, dear brothers and sisters, it is an honor and a privilege for me to briefly present to you what is actually going on in the Swiss Baptist Union (SBU).

Some words to my person: My name is Stefan Gisiger. For nearly 19 years I serve as Pastor in the small Baptist Church of Thalwil some 20 min from here. From 2004 to 2011 I served SBU as part time General Secretary with a 20% employment. For the last 3 years I was again member of the union leadership, one year of it as president.

1 The SBU Church Landscape

Let me begin with the Landscape of SBU Churches in Switzerland:

SBU consists of twelve Churches. Eleven are located in the German speaking part of Switzerland. Two are Brazilian Portuguese migrant churches in Zurich und Basel. One is a traditional international English speaking IBC Baptist Church (IB CZ) and one is located in Lugano, in the Italian speaking part of Switzerland. The other eight Swiss Baptist Churches have their origins in Swiss German speaking natives.

2 Connecting with what Dr. Rainer Ebeling said on Tuesday July 3rd

Secondly I will pick up the points Dr. Rainer Ebeling mentioned on Tuesday. By looking back in to SBU's history he concluded:

1. With the exception of two, none of the existing Baptist churches in Switzerland were the product of mission work and church-planting. They grew out of dissenting groups in the environment of the rise of free-churches in Switzerland.
2. Baptists have not developed a strategy for evangelization.
3. Their idea of the autonomy of the local church is far too strong.
4. They have no common agreement on their theology. The majority of their pastors were left-wing evangelicals, the churches were much more oriented at main-stream or even right-wing evangelicals.
5. I believe that in the last quarter of the 20th century there was a lack of common Baptist identity.

Let me refer throughout my presentation to some points in his list.

3 Personal Opinion on Pastoral Training in SBU

But first a personal opinion on the lack of common Baptist Identity in SBU on a church level: I think this connects to who the church is calling as pastor. Only two of the current German speaking pastors have been trained at a Baptist Theological Seminary/College. The other two are the pastors from the Brazil Portuguese Migrant Churches. IBCZ is installing a new Baptist trained English native speaking pastor coming Sunday July 8th.

In the last 40 years as SBU we neglected to look out for young people in our churches being called to be pastors. Where do the churches then search for a new pastor? Not in the own Union. Perhaps in the neighbor Union like the German Baptist union. They have graciously helped the Swiss Baptist Churches throughout their history and since the beginning of the Union in 1923 with sending pastors to the Swiss Baptist Churches.

Our Churches look wherever they can find their pastors. There are numerous free church Bible and pastoral training colleges in Switzerland – denominational and non-denominational. There are many different free church denominations. Today's denominational borders are fluent and the pastors normally change the denomination according to the proposed working place or the church they are called to. So evangelical Pastors tend to accept callings of more or less evangelical denominations. The same goes for the Pentecostal or Apostolic denominations.

Especially in small churches pastors are key to the Baptist Identity of the local church body. So when you recruit your pastor in a non-Baptist denomination – what do you do as church, as a union? Right – you send him to a Baptist pastoral short track. But this does not happen because – point three of Ebeling: Their (the SBU Churches) idea of the autonomy of the local church is far too strong. Every church decides on its own. Therefore you have no common understanding of the training of current and future pastors.

This is the actual situation when it comes to pastors. There would be much more to say about that.

4 Examples of thriving Church and Union Life

But there are other more pleasant things going on right now in our Union.

4.1 Department of Church Planting and Church Renewal

For the first time in their history, the 2018 annual convention of SBU has voted for the implementation of a department for Church Planting and Church Renewal on Union level with a 30% employ-

ment. And there is actually a project in progress of planting a church in a newly build quarter in the suburbs of Zurich near the airport with several thousand new inhabitants.

Now we pray that the enthusiasm that could be felt at the annual convention thrives back into the churches so that they really begin to look out for Church planters and for Church planting places.

4.2 Kirche Bild / Baptist Church St. Gallen

For about a decade now, the St. Gallen Baptist Church has a diaconal social project called “Läbeplus” (The Plus for Life) for reintegration of long-term unemployed people into the jobs market. They are doing an amazing job and helping a lot of people.

1998 the then-youth pastor of this church started a sports camp week during autumn school holidays for kids and teens. He called it “Projektwoche” (Project Week). They started with Basketball and Street dance day and half day camps (i.e. Projects). It has been growing steadily. This year they added juggling and Diabolo camps and now have 27 day and have-day camps for 700 -800 youngsters and kids. Since last year they are partnering with the “Athletes in Action” Branch of “Campus für Christus (Campus Crusade Switzerland) and have expanded the “Projektwoche” to Basel, Bern and the south eastern Zurich Country side. The goal is to encourage children to do sports and to have a good time together where the leaders of the caps can also share about their faith in Jesus Christ. “Projektwoche” is able to recruit actual or former Christian sports professionals of the different sports they offer. For example: The former NBA Basketball professional Mike “Rambo” Odem joins the “Projektwoche” from the beginning. He reports enthusiastically that besides sports he likes to tell the kids something about the faith in Jesus Christ. In St Gallen some 150 volunteers help making the “Projektwoche” possible. Most of them out of the St. Gallen Baptist Church.

4.3 ProjectResgate and Brazilian Baptist Church of Zurich

Some 12 years ago a Brazilian Baptist pastor together with his wife made holidays in Switzerland. The occasion was there 25th wedding anniversary. As they were walking through the streets of several bigger Swiss cities, they saw a lot of Brazilian Women on the street working in the sex business. So they recognized this as a call from God and dedicated their live to help this women get out of modern slavery in sex business and human trafficking. They called their ministry “ProjektResgate”. It’s based in Zurich. With great love for these women they help them getting out of business via secure shelters and make it possible for them to return to their home country Brazil. Their they implemented a program to reintegrate them into the jobs market to prevent happening the same thing again in their live.

Eventually the connections the project made grew. The leaders couple is now involved in EBFs Anti trafficking group. They want to begin to help women who have been trafficked from Eastern Europe.

Around the project a church arose, consisted of many cross cultural couples of Brazilian women and Swiss men.

4.4 Baptist Church Baden-Wettingen and Refugee Work and Church Planting

In Baden-Wettingen, not far to the west for Zurich, the little Baptist Church their grew tremendously. Seven years ago, they called a new pastor and from the beginning he was doing outreach. So the former small and culturally homogenous Swiss Baptist Church welcomes now every Sunday churchgoers from over 15 nations. They are engaged in Refugees / Asylum Seekers / Migrant Work among Arabs, Africans and Asians through celebrations, barbecues and children's programs. They do street mission and facilitate international mothers meetings. They have a Pentecostal African migrant church in their house and now a Mongolian group seems to grow into a Mongolian church through the help of a Mongolian Missionary for Europe based in Vienna.

4.5 Baptist Church Bern

In Bern the Baptist church partners with an other evangelical free church. Both cannot survive on their own. So they are on the track to merge the two churches. They already live their church live as one church but haven't formally merged yet. Malicious gossip calls this cohabitation. They started an outreach project into their urban neighborhood called "Garage Café".

The good thing is that the initiatives come from the local churches. The other side of the coin is, that there is almost no sense of connecting within the union body. See Ebeling point three.

4.6 SBU Memberships in larger Organizations

4.6.1

BF and BWA

Not to forget: SBU is a member of EBF and BWA. Some of SBUs members contribute to EBFs IBTSC's Trust and the EBF TRANSFORM Leadership program.

4.6.2

Swiss Council of Churches (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Christlicher Kirchen in der Schweiz AGCK.CH)

Last millennium, Early in the 70ies of its last century, then SBU President Claus Meister, Professor at IBTS Rüslikon, was engaged in ecumenical talks between mainline churches and free churches to form a Swiss Council of Churches. After the Second Vatican Council in the 60ies, there was an ecumenical spirit of optimism. Eventually this lead in 1971 to the founding of the Swiss Council of Churches "SCC" with SBU as founding member. Since then, SBU is engaged together with the other

members churches of SCC to find more and more together under the slogan “Unity in Diversity”. One milestone was the signing of the “Declaration of Riva San Vitale” in 2014. Since 1973 there was an agreement between the three state Churches on the recognition of the each others (infant) Baptism. In the “Declaration of Riva San Vitale”, this Agreement was widened to other infant baptizing churches that have become members of SCC in the meantime.

In the preparation process, there was a lot of discussion. Every church had to present its stand on Baptism and its willingness to sign the widened agreement. SBU and Salvation Army did the same and stated that they will refuse to sign this declaration. SCC agreed, that both churches, as an addendum to the declaration text, shall declare the reason why at that given time they could not sign such a treaty.

The document has been widely distributed through Church Councils in other European states as a model to show how ecumene can be lived without breaking apart on the theological issues that arise over ecclesiological and baptismal differences. SBU played a major role in the development process of the “Declaration of Riva San Vitale”, despite the fact that we did not sign this agreement.

4.6.3

S

Swiss Union of Free Churches (Verband freikirchlicher Gemeinden VFG)

Furthermore SBU is a member of the Council of the Union of Free Churches in Switzerland. During the Spanish flu epidemic in 1918, the state authorities believed they can stop it by prohibiting assemblies of many people and therefore also forbid Sunday Worship Services in the free churches. This unilaterally hit the free church unions because a ban on meeting met them at heart. It was also considered unfair given the fact that the State/Mainline churches were not affected by this ban and that restaurants and inns were allowed to stay open too. Through the Swiss Evangelical Alliance, the then existing free church unions in November 1919 formed the Swiss Council of Free Churches. Today SBU discusses together with the other churches in this body free church issues and how the free churches can work together to reach the people of Switzerland with the Good News of Jesus Christ.

4.6.4

D

-A-CH Meeting

The Presidents and General Secretaries of the German, Austrian and Swiss Baptist Union meet regularly once a year to discuss common issues in the German speaking part of Europe, trends in society, politics, economics, ecumene and so on and how this affects Baptist church and union life. They also exchange what is going on in their respective unions, where the challenges are and so on. It is called D-A-CH – Treffen, and is well established.

4.6.5

European Baptist Mission International (EBMI)

One part of SBU life is mission work abroad. SBU is founding member of EBMI. In Switzerland we call it "EBM Schweizer Zweig" with its own Verein/legal entity. Several missionaries of Switzerland have served in different places in Africa since the 1950s. Today there is no missionary. But thanks to the thriving leadership of EBM Schweizer Zweig, people in the churches of SBU relate to the projects of EBMI. This results in EBM Schweizer Zweig being first on the list of donations per member.

5 Conclusion

On the level of Church life, SBU is somewhat flourishing. It's more or less normal free church life now. However the first decade of the new millennium was hard for the union. There have been several conflicts in several churches which ended all in the termination of the pastors service in the respective churches.

My duty was to give you an more or less adequate overview of what is going on in SBU. Due to the given timeframe, I cannot go into further details.

Coming to an end, I'd like to come back to three statements of Dr. Ebelings list

- The idea of the autonomy of the local church is far too strong.
- The Churches have no common agreement on their theology.
- In the last quarter of the 20th century there was a lack or more a loss of common Baptist identity.

Despite the thriving church life here and there in SBU, the union, its leadership, its pastors and the leadership of the churches, they all need to take the time to discuss this three important issues and find a common agreement on their theology and Baptist identity.

In my humble opinion, the future of Baptist Identity and Baptist life in Switzerland depends on such a process.

Thank you very much for your attention.

Stefan Gisiger, MTh, Pastor Baptist Church Thalwil, July 6th 2018