

The “Berlin Conference” 1884

Declaration of the European Baptist Mission
at the Jubilee Conference towards its 50th anniversary
in Berlin in the year 2004

Delegates of the member churches of the European Baptist Mission (EBM) met in Berlin for the fiftieth anniversary of this mission organization. Mindful of the historic site where the “Berlin Congo Conference” took place 120 years ago; and mindful of the resolutions drafted, which affected and determined the fate of African people and nations, we decided to take a look at the past, to take a position on it, and to look to a new future of partnership.

The Past

1. The International Africa Conference met from November 15, 1884 until February 26, 1885 in Berlin. With then Imperial Chancellor Bismarck presiding, delegates from 14 nations discussed the colonial dividing-up of Africa. The participating countries were Belgium, Denmark, the German Empire, England, France, Italy, the Netherlands, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Portugal, Russia, Sweden, Spain, the Ottoman Empire, and the U.S.A.

2. The reason for the conference was the dispute over the Congo, the heart of Africa. In the course of the negotiations the “Congo Act” was signed, which decreed the neutralization of the Congo basin, recognized the independence of the Congo state under the sovereignty of the Belgian King Leopold II, and confirmed Congo (Brazzaville) as a French possession. Further, freedom of trade and navigation was agreed upon, slavery was forbidden, and general principles for the acquisition of colonies were drawn up.

3. Whereas about 10% of Africa was in European hands in 1876, by 1902 90% of African territory had been divided up between the colonial powers who had been participants in the Berlin Conference.

4. This division of Africa, which was planned, decreed and made possible by the Berlin Conference, resulted not only in a political splintering of Africa, but also in a destruction of natural ethnic, social and national connections, which led to tensions that continue to cause bloody conflicts.

Our Position

5. To comment on the Berlin Conference of 1884, one must look at the current economic behavior of the industrialized nations. Through the World Trade Organization and the International Monetary Fund they have continued to treat African nations as cheap suppliers of raw materials, and have often used unfair trade and customs agreements to gain access to their markets, while closing themselves off for those exports.

6. As European Christians who follow the example of Jesus Christ, we must confess that we have profited from the inequality of nations and markets. We must confess that we are a part of a system that has for too long accepted these past and present injustices without resistance; and that has pocketed these profits for itself and its own prosperity without a guilty conscience. We confess that we stand in the debt of our African neighbors in many regards, and that we owe them more than the promise of a future work in partnership.

7. At the same time we ask our African partner churches for forgiveness for allowing the spirit of colonialism to make a mockery of the spirit of Christ. We ask for forgiveness for the lack of fraternalism and simple partnership, which regularly comes to light in the joint activities of the European and African churches. We also ask for forgiveness for the events of the past, which we recognize today as being contrary to the spirit of Christ.

The Future

8. We support the challenge for a “New Berlin Conference”, which has been raised several times, especially by Nigerian president Obasanjo since he took office in 1999. As member churches of the European Baptist Mission we call upon our governments to immediately stand up for the convening of this type of a truly “new” conference.

9. We do, however, look to the future and vow to devote our energy toward the goal of having peace and justice prevail in all levels of our shared lives: church, society, economics and politics. We do this in accordance with the words of our Lord: “Blessed are the peacemakers.” We vow to learn from the 1884 Berlin Conference to strive for a world where justice prevails.

Berlin, May 1, 2004