



## Dear Praying Friends in Europe,

I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people— for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. 1Tim 2:1-2

These verses have been a guiding light to the ministry that my wife and I were called to almost 30 years ago. Indeed, they were also the driving force for Ortwin Schweitzer and myself when we launched the Canopy of Prayer. The question today is which authorities? We live in a time where few nations are able to live in splendid isolation, and today there are many different institutions that rule over our lives. In this issue I want to look at one institution that many Europeans know little about, yet arguably holds the most significance for Christians today.

## The Council of Europe (CoE)

In 1949 this institution was formed in Strasbourg following the Second World War. It was seen as the primary effort towards bringing peace and hope to the continent. But why Strasbourg? This city - and indeed the whole region of Alsace - had long seen conflict over territorial claims but it was Ernest Bevin (Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, UK) who said “This city which, more than any other one, was the victim of the European nations’ stupidity, which thought to solve their problems with the war, now has to embody the symbol of reconciliation and peace”.

What does the CoE do and how does it differ from the European Union (EU)? Let’s start by briefly describing the make-up and areas of responsibility of these two institutions.



The CoE at present has 46 member states and 6 observer states. Each member state sends a delegation made up of members of their national parliaments to represent them in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) and each member state sends Ministers from their Governments to represent them in the Committee of Ministers.

For clarification, the EU only has 27 member states and a Parliament of directly elected members, with the European Council (not to be confused with the Council of Europe) made up of national government ministers, and a Commission whose Commissioners are nominated by the member states and ratified by the Parliament of the EU.

Before moving on to explain the importance of the Council of Europe let’s look at the role of the EU. The EU is the development of the initial Assembly of the European Coal & Steel Community (ECSC), a trade organisation. This later became the European Economic Community (EEC), European Community (EC) and finally the European Union (EU) which we know today. Its primary role is to oversee trade, both within Europe and internationally, and the harmonisation of regulations in areas like workers’ rights, pharmaceuticals, transport, and food standards. Increasingly it has sought to enter into areas of human rights, which are not officially part of its remit.

### So what is the role of the Council of Europe?

The role of the Council of Europe is to promote democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and a key role of the CoE is to oversee the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) which it does by the passing of reports through its parliamentary assembly. This is often called ‘soft law’ which refers to legal acts that are not formally legally binding. To explain soft law in relation to the work of CoE we have to go back to one of its first tasks in 1949 which was to draw up “The Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms” which was an international agreement. It is this Convention, along with documents adopted by the Council of Europe, such as

reports, resolutions, recommendations or declarations, that have become guidelines which form the basis of the decisions made by the ECHR Court.

All the member states are signatories to the Convention and, as such, have agreed to abide by the rulings of the ECHR. Member states are encouraged to apply the decisions passed by the PACE through their national parliaments and into law, but in reality, it is often only after a country has found itself on the wrong side of a judgement by the ECHR court that this ever happens. It then falls to the Committee of Ministers to supervise the execution of the judgement.

It is important to understand here that any individual citizen or organisation of a member state, can take their government to the ECHR court after having exhausted the judicial system in their own country, if they feel a personal freedom or human right has been removed or undermined.

### So, what are the areas in the Council of Europe and its oversight of the European Court of Human Rights that are important for us to be aware of?



The main areas are covered by Articles 8 to 14 of the convention which cover family life, religious freedom, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association, and discrimination. But obviously there are other areas that as Christians that we would consider important because of our biblical values and truths.

Unfortunately, Christians have largely withdrawn from these institutions and have not been as willing as perhaps we should have been to engage with the debate. With the exception of a few Christian non-governmental organisations (NGOs), Christians have largely been silent and other voices have filled that void. These voices have promoted ideologies that are not only anti-Christian but also dangerous for society as a whole, promoting issues like assisted dying (suicide), euthanasia, abortion, LGBTQ+ and gender identity.

It's sad that institutions that were established by people of faith have been so ignored by many Christians and allowed to become abused by voices and ideologies that deny God's truth and design for humanity.

However, as we turn to prayer for those in authority, remember the fact that God always leaves a remnant. One of the encouragements that we have been privileged to witness is seeing Members of Parliament from different countries working and praying together with NGOs and seeking to influence the various committees with biblical values.

### Can we pray for:-

- All those in authority who represent us in the Council of Europe and the European court of Human rights.
- Those NGOs who seek to highlight Christian values to those who serve in these institutions.
- More Christians to become actively involved in all places of authority and influence.

### Update:

### UK Assisted Suicide Bill

Last week, UK members of parliament voted 330-275 in favour of a bill that would legalise assisted suicide in the UK.

However, the fight is not over yet. The bill will now go through its committee stages where changes can be proposed before it comes back for its third reading. Some MPs voted in favour of the bill, waiting to see if changes can be made over safeguarding, but it will be harder to stop the bill now.

However, Many MPs did change their minds to vote "No" and we will continue to pray that more will understand the impact on the vulnerable in society if this bill becomes law.

### Further Prayer:-

1. France is entering a very turbulent time with the collapse of Michel Barnier's government and with 3 political blocs who refuse to compromise or work with each other. Let's pray for this divided nation, which is also crucial to the wellbeing of the EU.
2. Pray for a solution to the unrest in Georgia after a contested election result, the suspension of the country's bid to join the EU, nightly street protests, and the detention of opposition leaders.

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