ECUMENICAL FORUM OF EUROPEAN CHRISTIAN WOMEN
FORUM OECUMENIQUE DE FEMMES CHRETIENNES D'EUROPE
ÖKUMENISCHES FORUM CHRISTLICHER FRAUEN IN EUROPA

EFECW News

December 2016

Blessed Christmas and a peaceful New Year!

It is hard to say joyful words in these days after Paris, Nice, Brussels, Istanbul, Berlin, Syria, Yemen, Ukraine, Middle East, Mediterranean Sea, Africa…

So let us promise to one another like the Angel did:

"Have no fear; for truly, I give you good news of great joy which will be for all the people. For on this day, in the town of David, a Saviour has come to birth, who is Christ the Lord."

Luke 2:10-11

National Coordinators' Meeting
Larnaka (Cyprus) 29 June – 3 July 2016

"… Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5,24):
How can justice, cultural diversity and sensitivity go hand in hand?"

The National Coordinators' (NC) meeting this summer brought together around 60 women – the national coordinators of all member organisations of EFECW – from 24 countries in Larnaka (Cyprus). The NC meeting consisted of two parts: one part was dedicated to the theme ***"… Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5,24):*** **How can justice, cultural diversity and sensitivity go hand in hand?"**. The reflection around this theme, which is the

result of the strategic priorities set by the General Assembly in 2014, will help both the European and the national organisations to develop an action plan in the area. The other part of the NC meeting, the "business" part, was a moment of sharing and exchanging of various reports as well as fine-tuning future activities and events.

Programme highlights

A *theological input* by Dr. Dr. Vivie Mavroska, which first explained the main issues – social justice as well as God's omnipotence and final judgement – raised by the prophet Amos and how water, in Amos book, is the symbol of purification and reinstallation of justice and righteousness. In the New Testament, Christ is the "living water" himself and offered to all who are "thirsty", leaving the choice to righteousness, justice, truth, to those who ask and search for it. "All the creation is pure and good. In its route to the likeness of God there are lots of wounds" is a reality that we are called as Church to heal to be faithful to our true being. The following statement by St. Maximus the Confessor "Church is the creation and creation is the Church" was a concept debated in depth in working groups.

Five *workshops* answering the previously identified needs and interests of the national coordinators:

1. Young women's strategy
2. How to launch a new Forum group

3. How to structure a meeting
4. Advocacy
5. Women in Church and Society today: 20 years after the WCC decade

A guest *speaker* from the World Council of Churches, Ms Fulata Moyo on the topic: "en-gendering unity: the building of a just Community of Women and Men in the Church in the multi-religious context" giving a historical review of the presence of women in the ecumenical movement and an overview of the development of women's issues in the Christian churches.

Launching the *film* 'Gardens of Eve' part of the 5-year EFECW project Pop-Up Monastery (PUM). The film follows the women leading the project, as well as participants, as they uncover what it means to have faith, to live in community, to be searching, and to support one another on our journeys.

National *reports* and *networking:* space was offered to share news, exchange experiences and plan future activities together at a regional and European level.

Prayer and ecumenical *worship*: strong emotional and unifying moments for participants, who appreciated the variety as well as the detailed and careful preparation of praying events. An emotional memorial prayer for EFECW founder Ruth Epting was organised, including participants' testimonies and prayers.

Excursion and *celebrating* together are important to the constructive atmosphere of open dialogue and living sisterhood in EFECW.

Special features

The venue contributed in a special way to the Conference. On one hand the physical conditions (warm weather, sun, sea) contributed immensely to the participants' sense of well-being and on the other hand the local experience of ecumenism and authentic intercultural dialogue brought in by our members in Cyprus was a living example of possible changes in other European countries, even structural and political ones.

Strategic direction and future planning

The National Coordinators meeting enabled EFECW to develop a number of these key priorities and themes through the keynote speeches and workshops highlighted above. As we now look to planning our next General Assembly in Serbia in 2018, we will continue to address these aims through three ongoing working groups:

- JustRight: women in church and society (marking the anniversary of the WCC decade)
- Young Women's Strategy
- Ecclesiology (linked to the Conference of European Churches working group)

We look forward to welcoming new and younger women to EFECW, and ensuring that the original aims of the organisation remain at the core of its identity – to strengthen the ecumenical network of women, to help women to promote initiatives for peace, justice and reconciliation, and to challenge women to take up leadership roles in church and society.

EFECW Coordinating Committee meeting

Rabat, Malta, 27-30 October 2016

From 27-30 October 2016 the coordinating committee (CC) of EFECW met on the island of Malta at the Carmelite Retreat Centre "Lunzjata" in Rabat. We were delighted to welcome Zsuzsi Soos to our meeting, who had been unable to attend recent meetings after having given birth to her first child. Unfortunately, Sr Marianne Milde CJ was unable to be with us (present in a European meeting of "Congregatio Jesu" in Bucharest), and we definitely missed her humour and helpful contributions. We had a packed agenda as always, but also enjoyed spending time together chatting and catching up on news.

Part of the programme included a mid-term reflection, as we are now halfway through our term as a CC. On reflection we realised how much we had grown as a team, and how much had been achieved since we first started work in 2014. We also reflected on the recent NC meeting in Cyprus, which was our first one as a CC, and we were grateful for the positive feedback received from NCs following this meeting. As a team we are always keen to learn from our experiences, and we also considered how we might apply the learning from this meeting to our next event – the General Assembly in Serbia, 2018.

A large part of our meeting was taken up with forward planning of the General Assembly, and we had extremely fruitful discussions on both the theme and content, and also the practical details that accompany the organising of an event of this size. We look forward to sharing news with forum members over the next few months as (about) our planning progresses.

As always we were delighted to welcome local forum women to our meeting – this included women from Catholic Action, Churches Together in Malta, and the Catholic Ecumenical Commission. It was very interesting to hear about the situation on the island, and we also provided an overview of how national fora work and some of our ongoing projects, which we hope will be helpful for the Maltese Forum as it continues to grow.

Jaqueline Stuyt Legacy Fund Projects 2016

"Healthy food: from garden to table", EFCW Croatia

The event has been organized in cooperation with the association "OSVRT" (Urban gardens of Osijek) in two terms (spring and autumn). In the first term, which was held from May 13th -15th 2016, sisters from EFCW Croatia from Osijek and nearby and Zagreb have taken part as well as our sisters from Serbia (branches Zemun and Novi Sad). Everything took place in the facilities of the Evangelical Lutheran church in Osijek. All guests were accommodated in the parish premises where the lectures were being held, whereas the workshops took place in the parish yard where all participants (26 women and 3 men) applied what was presented in the lectures which the guest lecturer, Mrs Senka Štorat (agronomist- specialised in phytopatology), had prepared.

The main issues of the lecture were specifying the difference between bio and eco cultivating, on what kind of parcels is cultivating possible (gardens, terraces, balconies), how to organize them (types of flowerbeds, containers, plastic bottles, etc.) how to organize good and avoid bad plant neighbourhood, plants which preserve and improve both human and plant health, basic technics of composting, bio-nourishment (which is to be pointed out more specific in the autumn term of the seminar).

Planting into plastic bottles fixed on wooden palettes (usually used for transporting goods).
Be sure to add a few nasturtiums and marigolds – the most useful helpers against vermin in the vegetable garden...

During the workshop we planted certain vegetables, herbs and flowers in different ways on prepared flowerbeds of different kinds.

We seeded into the open flowerbed according to the good neighbour principle. Be free to disperse some garlic upon the flowerbed – parasites avoid it as well.

And found out how to improve an ugly part of the garden – by turning it into a gorgeous alpinium.

In the meantime all participants mingled and exchanged opinions and advises.
The second day of our seminar we rejoiced together in celebrating Pentecost filling our spiritual batteries.

At the visit to the Osijek urban gardens, on ground given to disposal from the city council gardening amateurs and healthy food lovers made use of it by growing various kinds of plant material from vegetables over herbs to flowers.

This is the result of our workshop, and the internal committee has inspected it. The second part of this seminar continued in fall, where we could see what came out of our flowerbed and the plastic bottles. Finally, behold how our Lord showed His blessing presence all three days long.

By Ana Slačanac

"Theology through Art"

March 18-20, 2016, Corfu, Greece

Greek branch of EFECW "Damaris the Athenian"

Main objective was the establishment of a new Forum group on the island of Corfu, where religious communities of several Christian Churches co-exist and the women there, are interested in the promotion of the Forum´s ideas and ecumenical aims.

On the first day, besides visiting the venues in order to check that everything was in order, we met with residents of Corfu, representing the local church communities, discussing the possibility of a new group there.

On the second day, we had two events (morning and night). The whole concept was to present the different kinds of art in the Bible or inspired by the Bible. The project has been worked out by members of the Greek Forum who gave excellent presentations on:

a. Religiousness and Women standards in the work of Ionian Islands' poets
b. Prose and Poetry in the Holy Bible
c. Iconography in the East and the West
d. Icon as an experience of faith
e. Music as a means of worshiping God (Religious music concert in cooperation with the Department of Music Studies of the Ionian University and the participation of local musical groups).

The morning session was held at the Cultural Center of the Holy Metropolis of Corfu and the evening, at the Holy Catholic Cathedral of Corfu (Duomo).

On the third day members of our group attended their own churches, meeting women of Corfu in order to discuss future activities that will make the forum more widely known on the island and will help create a new and active Forum group there. We also took time to do some evaluation of the whole project with our representative in Corfu.

By Ersie Antoniadou

"Created in God's image – Women's rights, a matter of belief and justice, from the perspective of an ecumenical European women's movement"

Presentation held by Martina Heinrichs during the CEC Summerschool on Human Rights of Women and Children in Thessaloniki, May/June 2016

Introduction

Since more than forty years various insights coming from feminist theology and women's or gender studies created a new self-awareness among women. Being a Roman Catholic feminist theologian involved in ecumenical and interreligious encounters I will explore these insights by focussing on Christian feminist theology and on some practises in the contemporary ecumenical women's movement, especially in Europe. Hermeneutics of how to read our holy scriptures will be described as well as other items which are of high importance for women of faith today.

1) Feminist theology – Christian perspective

Halfway of the seventies and in the aftermath of the UN International Women's Year (1975) feminist theology was introduced in Europe. Women in their churches, but also in the theological faculties no longer accepted automatically what male theologians, clergy men and other high ranking persons told them about the will of God, how to be a woman in church, society and family, how to read the Holy Scriptures. They started to analyse and criticise their traditions, read between the lines in the bible, and claimed a live giving theology – not abstract and full of dogma's but down to earth, dealing with every day challenges and problems of concrete human beings.

2) Mary as an example

Being from a Roman catholic background I take Mary as an example. The traditional teachings presented her as a role model, the good obedient believer, mother and virgin at the same time, pure and sexless. As the Mother of God she stayed modestly at the background of her son, she bowed in front of the will of God who told her through the Angel Gabriel that she will bear a child without having sex with a man. This image of a woman has been given to generations of Christian women to tell them how to be a good woman, mother and housewife. And it has been played out against the image of Eve, the seducer full of lust and erotic power, dangerous to Adam in paradise, and to all men in general. Mary, the good woman, over against Eve, the bad woman. In a feminist perspective we can see Mary as an autonomous independent woman who decides consciously that she is ready to bear a son. In the magnificat (Lk 1:46-55), the prayer of thanks which she says after having got this news, she gives a sharp picture about right relationships in society. Her God is a God of justice:

He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,
and has lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.

3) Women created in the image of God – women's rights

NO VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Being created in the image of God means dignity for and self-determination of women. Expressed in the language of human rights there are several aspects, and the list is far from complete:
- The right of the integrity of the body, no harm to it, no forced actions. But we have also the right to be 'imperfect'. We do not need to shape our bodies as men and the fashion industry want it to be, like a slim model shown by the media.
- Women have the right to health and health care.
- We have the right of living freely our sexuality be it hetero or lesbian.
- We have reproductive rights to choose freely for biological or social motherhood.
- There are sexual rights – being sexually active freely and on our own will which means: no rape in war situations or in marriage and no penetration or other sexual actions against our will.
- Economical rights like financial independence, equal salaries.
- Rights of equal citizenship, democracy and equal participation in secular institutions and in politics
- Equal rights and participation in our faith communities, representing God as well as men do, right to religious expression from our own female point of view.

4) Women reading Holy Scriptures

After having been excluded from reading the Holy Scriptures for many centuries women started to read and analyse the bible on their own terms. And it became obvious that it matters who is reading. Going to the text in its original language, there are often several possibilities to translate. Not all women in the bible are sinners and whores as it seems in the traditional versions. When women look through their own glasses they often discover much more woman friendly interpretations which are also possible. Looking with suspicious eyes at the old traditions they creatively find what is not said and hidden between the lines. So it became clear that many teachings had been coloured by interests of the hierarchical church and powerful clergy men, used as power-mechanisms to keep believers, and specially women, in an obedient role.

5) Claiming our space in the churches: in the centre, not in the margin

Some ten years later Christian women – catholic and protestant – started in the Netherlands to give up modesty concerning their role in the churches. Though some Christian churches (protestant and old-catholic, not Eastern orthodox and Roman catholic) do ordain women which means that they have women priests, some even women bishops, this does not automatically mean that their churches have become entirely women friendly and inclusive. Free spaces were still felt to be

needed inside and outside of the churches. The first Ecumenical Women's Synod took place in 1987. This was no longer a nice conference of women to meet and exchange about several subjects but a serious and policy making meeting. A synod is a gathering of church leaders in the protestant church or bishops in the catholic church who take decisions about theological items and church policies. By claiming the word 'Synod' (coming together, but also: being on our way together) these women described themselves as decision makers taking their affairs into their own hands. Seventy conclusions and demands on the position of women in church and society, on women friendly exegesis and liturgical language, on sexual violence, on (homo)sexuality, and many other items were addressed to decision making powers in churches and society with the aim to improve the lives of women. These were exiting times, we were pioneering, we felt that we were writing history. Up till today every five years we hold such a women's synod. So the idea is still alive. Many new items have been brought to the table. Feminist theology itself was criticised as being too one-sided: white, middle class, heterosexual, Europe and North America centred. Black Christian women raised their voice and formulated a womanist theology. Lesbians developed a new perspective and criticised

hetero-centrism. Third world theologians formed their own networks and theology. This all added up to more diversity and wholeness without wiping out the differences. And the growing migration to our countries brought also new religions to Europe and the Netherlands adding up to those communities of former colonies which were already present since a longer period. We all know that this unfortunately did not go without tensions, and brought more populism and islamophobia, even murdering and political killings to the Netherlands and other European countries. One of the initiatives to strive for more understanding and peaceful living together is the interfaith dialogue and interreligious learning which started in the ecumenical women's movement in the nineties. Muslim and Christian women came together to read in their Holy Books, and to learn more about the life and religion of each other. Throughout Europe and even worldwide interreligious women's networks were born in this period.

6) Leadership of women – new forms

More than twenty-five years after the first Women's Synod and on the background of sociological surveys showing an increasing secularisation during the last two decennia in the Netherlands and other countries of Europe we have to face that the influence of churches as moral authority has gone down dramatically. Still Christian women have their networks and communities inside and outside or on the edge of churches. However, for most of these communities we have to say that they are aging. The Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women, on the other hand, can rejoice in a group of young women who are active and visible. Taking into account increasing tendencies of

not church binded spirituality or religiosity in nowadays Europe, they set up a project which is called "Pop Up Monastery", a flexible spiritual place which they intend to offer every year in the summer in another European country to welcome guests and travellers on their spiritual journey. They can stay for some days or weeks to relax, meditate, practise yoga, be in silence, talks and discussions, or for ecological gardening and painting or other creative activities. This intergenerational retreat seems to answer to the needs of young (and older) modern women to recover from a busy daily life. At the same time and as another example of religious leadership of women there is a discussion going on about ecumenical sharing in the Forum. There are doctrines and dogmas of our official churches which make it impossible to share Eucharist, bread and wine in memory of Jesus dead on the cross, though we all belong to Christian churches. A very creative, but sometimes also difficult process has started to explore alternatives of what we possibly can share as women. As symbols of our daily life, of our joys and sufferings we had: bread and roses, water and tears, grapes and stones, candles/lights and nuts. To name only some. All connected to the Holy Scriptures and to the stories of ordinary people, to literature and life stories.

7) Conclusions

Woman on the lead – female religious leadership

- patriarchal analysis of mainstream religious tradition: be sharp and suspicious
- reading our Holy Scriptures with feminist glasses: where are the women? What is said, what is not mentioned? Who speaks in what interest? Read between the lines. Study the original language and seek for more possible translations.
- strengthen women leaders within our (declining) faith communities
- create new safe spaces and alternative networks: for experiments, for open discussions and debates, for alternatives in a secular world, for creative solutions, for new religious symbols and holistic language
- believing on our own terms as self-conscious women in the image of God
- be in solidarity with women
- struggle for human rights of women in society and church
- show commitment for the needs of the world

Ecumenical young women summer-camp

Haghbtavank, Armenia

The Christian Women's Forum of Armenia, in collaboration with the Bible Society of Armenia, organised an ecumenical summer camp. The World Council of Churches Armenia Round Table Foundation, Ordinate of the Armenian Catholic Church in Armenia, Armenian Evangelical Church and Armenian Missionary Association also supported the project.

The Ecumenical camp was held in Haghbatavank (10th century monastery) with thirty teenage girls 14-16 years old of different nationalities living in Armenia (Armenians, Assyrians and Greeks), and of different churches (Armenian Apostolic Church, Armenian Catholic Church, Armenian Evangelical Church and the Syriac Orthodox Church).

The slogan of the camp runs as follows: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39) and the goal was to sow the seeds of love, respect, tolerance and mutual understanding for the coming generations.

The eight-day program covered:

1) Bible Study

2) Meetings with spiritual fathers of different churches and heads of partner institutions. In the result of these meeting-seminars, the campers received clear understanding and accurate information about different churches, learned about their similarities and differences and, most importantly, understood that it is the Christ that unites us.

3) Painting, pottery and national dance classes.

Campers' morning schedule in Haghbat began with a warm-up session, which was followed by the morning prayer in St. Nshan Church together with the abbot of Haghbat Monastery. After breakfast and a short rest, the girls were divided into three groups and were involved in painting, pottery and national dancing activities. After classes campers had lunch with their instructors. Meeting-seminars with a psychologist and social worker were held for campers after the lunch. Due to the special activities and measures taken during these seminars, within a short period of time, we were capable to uncover certain matters that the participants faced and focus on them. They were often given a chance to freely express their thoughts, emotions and impressions. For three days the girls had meetings with

a doctor who introduced vital hygiene, health and body care information. The meetings were followed by active discussions.

On the second half of the day, the campers were divided into 4 groups to take part in the "Introduction to Scripture" course. The specialist of the Holy Bible was assigned to each group, namely Father Atom Asatryan, Monika Hovsepyan, Marianna Apresyan and Anna Sukiasyan. After each class, devoted to the readings and discussions of the Holy Bible, the instructors passed a quick review questionnaire and prepared the participants for the Holy Bible Quiz which took place at the closing party.

Zina Voskanyan, the member of the *Christian Women Forum* and author of *The Holy Women of Christianity*, held a seminar for girls about *Mother Teresa as a Symbol of Humanity*.
After the evening prayer and dinner, the campers had a chance to take part in film viewing and viewing of thematic clips, after which they were engaged in active and useful discussions.
Campers went on a pilgrimage to the Convent of the Virgins.

At a solemn closing ceremony of the camp, the campers showed their hand-made works and danced the national dances they had learnt. They participated in the Holy Bible Quiz, and the team *Luke the Evangelist*, led by Fr. Atom, was announced to be the winner.
Having sheltered thirty teenager girls under one roof for almost eight days, and having kept them away from secular environment and having followed Mother Teresa's example, the symbol of mercy, we managed to reach the following goals:

A) Provide our teenagers with accurate information on Christianity, Christian churches and ecumenism.
B) Sow the seeds of love, respect, tolerance, mercy and obedience.
C) Sending these thirty girls back into the social context to deliver the key message: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself"/ Love your neighbour as yourself/.

By Marianna Apresyan

News from EFECW member organisations

New National Coordinators, Austrian Ecumenical Forum of Christian Women

My name is **Regina Augustin**, I'm catholic and studied theology in Salzburg. Soon I came close to the foundation PRO ORIENTE which was founded by Cardinal Franz König. Its main aim is building bridges between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox and Oriental Churches. My interest for other churches and also for ecumenism grew after this encounter. Also feminism became an important issue for me. That's why I became a member of the Catholic Women's Association (kfboe).

In Salzburg I worked in the field of adult education for women, ecumenism and spirituality. Since October 2013 I'm the general secretary of the PRO ORIENTE foundation.

Just recently I was elected by the members of the Austrian Ecumenical Forum of Christian Women as one of the two national coordinators. For me it is important to integrate women's solidarity in every part of my life. That's why I want to be part of the Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women and represent Austria. I'm happy to work together with Esther Handschin from the United Methodist Church (UMC), who is the second national coordinator.

Esther Handschin, Salzburg and Vienna: I am one of the new national coordinators of the

Ecumenical Forum of Christian Women in Austria. I serve since seventeen years as pastor of the United Methodist Church (UMC) in Austria, first in Linz, then in Salzburg and since two years in Salzburg and Vienna. I represent the women's division of the UMC since four years in the Austrian Forum.

It is important for me to make the Austrian Forum better known in the several regions in Austria. In Salzburg for example exists a lively ecumenical group of women that gives support to celebrate the World Day of Prayer in the different churches. But there are few connections to other church women organisations. Why not give them the possibility to see what others are doing?

As the designated secretary of the Ecumenical Council of Churches in Austria I hope also to bring a women's perspective to the "official" ecumenical work in our country. Networking is one of my strengths, especially with people from different denominations. It's good to learn from each other for opening up my horizon. So I am glad to do this work together with Regina Augustin, who represents the Austrian Roman-Catholic Women's Movement.

Ecumenical Forum of Women in Denmark

Aagot Bohn, has died on 16th October 2016. She died peacefully at the age of 91.
For a number of years, she was the Danish coordinator and active as publisher of the first issues of the Newsletter.
The picture is from her 80th birthday in 2005. Since then she slowly became weaker and weaker.

Ellen Juhl Christiansen, Denmark

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and the **Ruth-Epting Fund** (www.efecw.net)

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