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Vision of Youth in Service for Unity: On the IXth WCC Assembly in Porto Alegre

“The ecumenical formation of youth is of decisive importance for the future of the ecumenical movement. The quality and quantity of persons interested in ecumenical life, both in the WCC and elsewhere, is declining. The survival of the ecumenical movement is largely conditioned on the active and responsible involvement of youth. A vision requires visionaries to dream and struggle for its realisation. The preparation of a new ecumenical generation is imperative. It must become a major focus for the ecumenical movement. The future belongs to those who have the vision and courage to shape it.”
(ARAM I)

It might be perceived from the quotation above that our article is a report of a young steward’s experience of the Assembly in Porto Alegre (Brazil), February 14–23, 2006, with some attempts at interpretation together with some lessons for the future.

Participating in the IXth Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) as a young Roman Catholic person was a unique experience. Thanks to the Magyar Roman Catholic Bishop’s Conference and the Magyar Ecumenical Council of Churches for their support and personal advice.

Preparation and Youth Assembly

Serious preliminary training of European stewards and youth delegates was organised by the Ecumenical Youth Council in Europe (EYCE) as a preparation for the Assembly in November 2005 in Sinaia, Romania.

Among other important things, the participants at this training familiarized themselves with the structure and decision-making process of the WCC; they got to know church politics and the newly introduced consensus method. The fact that trainings were organised in many European countries and other parts of the world shows how important it is to train young people ecumenically.

Moreover, the Assembly was anticipated by a brief so-called Youth Pre-Assembly (11–13 February). All of the stewards and many young delegates and other young people participated, all together around 250 youth.

The main purpose of this pre-Assembly was to provide the chance for young people to get acquainted with one another and find connections. Therefore the programme contained elements such as icebreakers and small group discussions.

Beyond the practical information, the preparation was helped by an introduction to the venue, the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul and the topics of the Ecumenical Conversations.

During the afternoon spent together with the participants of the Women's Pre-Assembly, a play was performed about the consensus method. This shows what a strong emphasis was put on the method that ensures listening to all opinions.

Samuel KOBIA, General Secretary of WCC, gave an introduction to the theme on the first afternoon of the Youth Pre-Assembly. Samuel KOBIA was given a tremendous reception; the atmosphere was warm and welcoming when he invited the youth to dialogue.

Among his suggestions, Samuel KOBIA emphasized the idea of having a global youth president instead of a young regional president. In this model, alongside the seven regional and the two orthodox presidents there would be a distinct youth president responsible for making sure the voices of young people are represented at the highest level in WCC. In this way, the current system of electing at least one regional president who is under the age thirty-five would be discontinued.

To support this idea, he drafted very clear and understandable reasons—especially in connection with representation that is the main role of a president. A too-young regional president is hardly acknowledged, but the same person as youth president would be suitable to represent the WCC.

After this meeting, it seemed youth were going to gain real representation. It was certainly a misunderstanding that according to a press release it was the young people who suggested the idea of a global youth president to the General Secretary.

Furthermore, Samuel KOBIA encouraged the youth to participate actively: "The Assembly can transform you, and you can transform the Assembly as well. Without young people, we cannot have the kind of challenge that has kept the ecumenical movement active and relevant."

All in all, the pre-Assembly was a good opportunity for young people to immerse themselves in the themes of the Assembly, formulate and share their thoughts, and from this start their participation tuned up for the Assembly.

The preparation for the ecumenical conversations should also be emphasized, where all young people were invited irrespective of their capacities. Though complete preparation was hindered by organisational and other difficulties, in many groups time was dedicated to the youth contribution.

Real Ecumenical Youth Participation

"God, in Your grace, let the youth transform the world"—prayed the youth on the last Central Committee Meeting before the Assembly; they called for a more open Church, more relevant theology, more credible ecumenism and a more participatory society.

ARAM I, Catholicos of Cilicia and moderator of the WCC, said in reply: “Youth have a special role in *being Church*. I consider the role of youth as being essentially an agent of transformation. We must help the youth to move from the fringes of our churches to the heart of the churches’ life and witness, including the decision-making processes. I cannot imagine a Church without its youth. They ensure the Church’s vitality and renewal. Youth should be actors, not merely listeners; they should be leaders, not merely followers.”

In accordance with the demand formulated above, during preparation and in press releases the role of youth and the intention to make it a Youth Assembly was strongly emphasised. The reasons referring to this were put into words also in the Report of the General Secretary and in the report of the Moderator:

“If we do not empower our youth, they will find other *spaces* outside the Church and the ecumenical movement to create their own networks and seek other ways of expressing their concerns, their dreams and visions. The IIXth Assembly was a Jubilee Assembly. This Assembly must become a Youth Assembly, not only by a strong youth presence, but also by their impact-making participation and challenging perspectives.”

The General Secretary, Samuel KOBIA, encouraged youth and called the audience to involve youth better into the ecumenical work. He also pointed out one of the most important aspects of this partnership:

“Young people need opportunities to experience the joy of working and praying with others from different traditions and different contexts. ...

“The time has come, when we must not only open opportunities to young people for their ecumenical growth and leadership, but where we must learn from the innovative and dynamic models of ecumenical relationships that youth can teach us.

“As an ecumenical and intergenerational family, we need to humble ourselves and to listen to young people. It was with young people that the ecumenical movement was born. It is young people’s passion and insight today that will ensure the relevance and vitality of it. Without young people our ecumenical family is incomplete.

“At this time we need to nurture meaningful relationships and shared leadership between the generations. Young people need to know that they are important partners and that we are open to learning from their ecumenical experience. ...

“They can help all of us to understand better where we are going and what kind of response is required of us. The issues that engage the ecumenical movement today are the issues which attract young people. But they need to be invited in. And they need to be equipped and supported to participate.”

Proportion of Youth at the Assembly

Regarding the proportion of youth, ARAM I said: “Youth have a major role to play in *being ecumenical*. They are called to become actively involved in reshaping and transforming the ecumenical movement. When we organise meetings or appoint committees, we should not regard youth as merely an appendix or a separate category. The question of youth is neither about quotas nor about programmes directed specifically at youth. I want to see youth actively present in all categories, in all places, in all areas,

and at all levels of the whole life and witness of the Church and the ecumenical movement.”

Regarding the question of the youth proportion in the Central Committee, the highest level of governance, it was planned to be twenty-five percent. Since the members of the Central Committee are Church delegates, realising the plan depends mainly on the cooperation of member churches.

In Porto Alegre, unfortunately, it did not happen. After the first nominations, the percentage of proposed delegates under thirty was only 13,5 percent. Then after some more negotiations this rate increased to 15 percent.

Talking about numbers is also important, since these numbers can be interpreted as signs of trust towards young Christian adults on behalf of the Church, which begins with the election of delegations.

Following this, let us quote the General Secretary again: “I challenge all of you Church leaders here at the Assembly to look at ways that your young people can participate. I call on all of us—ecumenical organizations, denominational structures, international and regional ecumenical bodies—to commit ourselves to youth. We have tried very hard to make this a youth assembly, but we have only partly succeeded. It needs the will and commitment of all of us.”

The idea of a global youth president mentioned before engaged the attention of youth until the last moments. They gathered in different circles and drafted documents to express their opinions.

At last, at this Assembly there was no youth president elected, neither on a global nor on a regional level. This fact equally saddened the young delegates, the stewards, other young participants and for sure, other less young participants as well.

Let us close this topic with the words of ARAM I: “I fully associate myself with the youths’ firm commitment and clear vision. As Head of Church and as Moderator, I have always enjoyed and been enriched listening to the youth in my church and in ecumenical circles. Listening to the youth! What a challenge to each of us sitting on chairs of authority in our respective churches and in ecumenical institutions! Certainly, youth have an important role to play in our Church, the ecumenical movement and our societies. But, to simply state that idea is not enough. We must engage them fully in the total life of the Church and the ecumenical movement at large.”

Experience of Youth at the Assembly

There were other ways for young people to participate at the Assembly as well. Along with the discussions of the delegates and taking part in the official programme, there were meetings called *mutirão*. The *mutirão* is a Brazilian term expressing an action of people who bring together what they have for a common and bigger benefit.

This is exactly what happened in the frame of this programme: numerous exhibitions, workshops, panel discussions and other interesting activities were organised by people who were willing to share their experience and knowledge.

Therefore participants were able to have the feeling that there were two parallel assemblies: one in the plenary hall where decisions were made to influence the next seven years of the Council, and another one on the entire campus where one could learn and experience the varied and colourful Christianity.

One of the pillars of the Assembly was common prayer on the theme of the title and Bible study. In the mornings and evenings there was time for prayers and worship, and there was time to study the Bible in smaller groups as well. According to some participants this was the most important and most joyful part of the programme.

For this Assembly more than four thousand Christians arrived from many parts of the globe. This made visible that the search for unity inspired by the Holy Spirit captivated the whole world. In Porto Alegre, we could experience the variety of regions and denominations together with the painful division.

Also among stewards, representatives of almost all denominations could be found. It was a great happiness to see Roman Catholic young people working with the same enthusiasm as the others.

Though the Roman Catholic Church is not (yet) a member of the WCC, beyond Cardinal Walter KASPER, the President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, a number of observers were sent, and many theologians and young people were present. Also this presence points to the fact that the Roman Catholic Church has committed itself irreversibly to the work for unity.

The Experience of Stewards at the Assembly

From one hundred countries, nearly 150 young people contributed to the success of the Assembly. Among stewards, people with disabilities found their role and shared the work as well.

Moreover, their presence motivated the others to solidarity and sharing. There was a young woman in a wheelchair whose personality fascinated everyone and showed an example with her kindness and stamina also in the hard and tiring moments.

Already in Porto Alegre stewards started to interpret their experiences; this spiritual work is still going on, since everybody has returned with ecumenical change in their minds and all of us have a need to multiply and share this.

Following this common reflection, we would like to describe now the most important lessons of the Assembly for stewards. Its basis is the continuous virtual communication among stewards.

We could be members of a community that *encompasses* the whole world. Anybody can be a member of this community irrespective of gender, age, skin colour, cultural background, origin or way of thinking, which are so important elsewhere. To be a part of this enormous *communion* gives courage and self-confidence to really transform the world in God's grace together.

Then again the cultural variety can cause difficulties. It was hard to find our places in this colour-cavalcade. Many of us could feel a bit lost in *diversity* at the beginning, but at the same time we could experience the collaboration of people with different cultures from all over the world.

As stewards, we experienced the importance and meaning of *stewardship* and *service*. The work, even the minor roles, contributed to the obstacle-free run of the Assembly; all kinds of help were instrumental in the bigger whole.

At the Assembly we made lifelong *friendships*. The common work, prayers and amusement made bonds that are able to stay strong even from distant places of the world. The common work formed our personality as well while experiencing the *service of leadership*. This experience can be beneficial in other walks of life, too.

All these together, the preparation, the experience of unity in diversity, stewardship and leadership in bonds of friendship meant a sort of *ecumenical formation*, which is necessary for blessed and effective work.

Finally, I finish with the *spiritual message* and experience of the Assembly: together with some other stewards, far from the noise of the Assembly and the fight for percentages, we used to go up to the top of our hotel to pray under the starry sky. The most memorable moments for us were these prayers and singings and a worship on the last morning led by a young woman pastor who was present as a steward.

Beside common action, common praying is indispensable. This gives the main spiritual content of the struggle for unity. Ecumenical efforts have perspectives only with common prayers: "God, in Your grace, transform the world!"