

Conference Report

'I was a stranger and you invited me in': Homelessness and Poverty Housing in Europe Today

Cluj-Napoca, Romania, 3–9 May 2006

Theory and practice went hand-in-hand at the most recent WSCF Europe solidarity conference on homelessness, which was organized in conjunction with Habitat for Humanity International (HfHI). Twenty-eight young people took part in the conference, which took place in Cluj-Napoca, the main city of the Transylvania region of western Romania. In addition to lectures and discussions about the topic, participants spent one day on an HfHI building site helping to actually construct a house for a low-income family.

The conference began Thursday morning with icebreaking games, including an interactive map activity where participants arranged themselves according to the place they call "home." An introduction was then given to the concept of poverty, as well as to the history of the host country (Romania) and the special circumstances that make poverty and homelessness such a big concern there. Combined with the preparatory reading sent to participants before the conference, this gave a solid background for those who might have been unfamiliar with the topic or context.

Next, a presentation was made of our partner, Habitat for Humanity, led by Augustus Jones, church relations coordinator for the Habitat Europe and Central Asia office in Budapest; and Ionuț Raita, executive director for the Habitat affiliate in Cluj. They presented several interesting facts and statistics about HfH—for example, there are 1 million people living in Habitat houses worldwide, and a new house is completed every 24 minutes. Habitat Romania was established in 1996; it now has seven affiliates and has built 200 houses.

After lunch, Father Tanase Nicolae from Valea Plopului gave a remarkable lecture on the social work of the Romanian Orthodox church, focusing especially on his work with the organisation Pro-Vita, which he founded. Tanase contended that Romania's extraordinarily high abortion rate is impoverishing the country; thus the Orthodox church is working to promote having babies, as well as seeking solutions for the shelter of the large number of orphans created by past Romanian social policies.

Father Tanase's lecture sparked intense discussion which carried through the coffee break and even a bit into the next session?small group conversations about the topic. Participants were asked to consider in which ways they think of themselves as "rich," and in which ways "poor," amongst other things. Discussion was lively and really got participants to thinking about the topic as it applied to themselves, not just to others.

Friday was the working day with Habitat; we began with a small tour of 12 homes constructed in Cluj last year, and then continued on to a building site for the current year, where participants helped to dig a hole for water storage, as well as to assemble wooden frames which will be the walls and floors of future houses. Fortunately the weather was good and everyone had an enjoyable time sawing, hammering and the like. Another fascinating aspect of the day was the chance to visit with the local low-income families whose homes we were working on, since they worked alongside us.

After the work was done, it was time for play: a barbecue for all the workers, followed by the trip back to our motel for film night. We watched a German documentary, *Die Mitte* (The Middle), about a Polish man's search for the centre of Europe. He travelled to various cities claiming this title, including four in Germany, one in Austria, three in Poland, one in Lithuania and one in Ukraine. With a touch of irony, the film highlights the problem of

defining "Europe" and examines the vast range of lifestyles and living conditions within this single continent.

Saturday it was back to the lecture-room, where Father Ionut Tutea of the organisation ARCA ("Ark") spoke about the situation of refugees in Romania and in Europe generally. His organisation works with the Romanian government to help integrate refugees—most of them coming from Islamic countries, like Afghanistan and Iraq—into Romanian society. They provide legal and financial aid in a very comprehensive program more advanced than those of even some neighbouring EU countries, e.g. Slovakia.

Next, Stephanie Roth presented the case of Rosia Montana, an area of the Apuseni mountains in Transylvania where a Canadian company plans to build an enormous open-cast goldmine. The project would require the destruction of several villages located in the two valleys affected by the project; 880 dwellings will be demolished and more than 2000 people relocated, many against their will. Roth who is Swiss, lives in Rosia Montana and works for a Romanian NGO fighting to stop the mining project (which is supported by the Romanian government) and to preserve the unique cultural and environmental heritage of the area.

Moving from the local to the global perspective, John Probhudan, office administrator for SCM U.K., explained the situation of poverty housing in his native Bangladesh and South Asia. Countless numbers of people there live in sub-standard housing, making them extremely vulnerable to natural disasters such as the tsunami of December 2004. People who are landless do not have any rights to return to their property after such a disaster, meaning they usually end up homeless and on the streets.

Finally, on a different note, an introduction was made to ecumenism and the work of WSCF. Csaba Orova, an ecumenical theologian from Hungary and chairperson of the Magyar SCM, gave a short but inspiring history of the ecumenical movement. Bogdan Popescu, theology coordinator of WSCF Europe, gave an overview of the recent general assembly of the World Council of Churches in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in February; then came Regional Secretary Hanna Tervanotko, who spoke more about the specific areas of ecumenical work that WSCF is involved in.

Sunday was another full day—but this time with sightseeing. The excursion began with a guided tour of a nearby salt mine, where we were better able to acquaint ourselves with the mining industry that forms the backbone of the area's economy. We had lunch in an ethnically Magyar village deep in the mountains, which is notable for its excellent state of historic preservation. Then we briefly visited a newly-built Orthodox convent nearby before heading back to Cluj for a short city tour, followed by vespers at the Orthodox cathedral.

The final day began with a handful of workshops aimed at helping participants to bring their thoughts and experiences from the conference back to their local contexts. One workshop focused on the Emmaus communities for homeless people started by a Roman Catholic priest in France and now existing throughout Europe; the second concentrated on following up the link between Habitat for Humanity and various local SCMs represented, in anticipation of future cooperation; and the third was a brainstorming session for how we as WSCF Europe, as well as our individual organisations, can help in the fight to save Rosia Montana.

Closing the thematic input, Constantin Asavaoie, chairman and founder of Prison Fellowship Romania (PFR), gave a moving personal testimony about his life leading up to his efforts to establish a prison ministry in Romania. Starting in 1992 with Bible studies and spiritual counselling in prisons, as well as charitable support, PFR has grown into an organisation of more than 5000 volunteers across the country, with six dedicated centres

to various at-risk populations—families of inmates, juvenile delinquents, single mothers, street children and homeless people.

Overall the conference provided us with an overview of myriad aspects of homelessness, ranging from refugees to impoverished persons to prisoners to those dispossessed by the greedy capitalist machine. Working with Habitat gave us the opportunity to go further and contribute a bit to the fight against poverty housing, recognising that all of us are responsible for this fight in the spirit of Matthew 25,35: "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in."

[More Information on Habitat for Humanity](#)

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