Living in a World of Technology: The changes of social behavior.
Läyliäinen, Finland
29 March—4 April

Social Media such as Twitter, Facebook and Youtube are fast becoming part of everyday life for young Christians. WSCF-Europe gathered nearly 40 students and young people from across Europe in the small village of Läyliäinen, Finland to discuss the influence of new communication technologies on their daily lives. Through lectures, participant-led workshops, games and role-plays participants explored how they use social media, how they can use online tools as part of their faith, and to campaign for social justice. We asked: What would Jesus tweet? Does the Internet make everyone equal? Is it possible to worship God online?

Games: Tweet and Shout

Our opening icebreaker game explored the limitations of communicating using social media. Defining yourself in 140 characters isn’t the easiest task—but when that’s all the space you have, how would you choose to represent yourself? Do you tell the world about your beliefs, your fears, your looks, the things that annoy you?

Participants were able to get to know one another through a self-describing “Tweet” of 140 characters. Through this game, we soon realised that there’s much more to a person than can be shared in through social networking sites.

Lectures: Communications, Social Media & Active Citizenship

Marko Siitonen, Professor of Communications at the University of Jyväskylä, challenged participants to think about the tools we use for communication. Using a historical overview he showed how communication has evolved from something as basic as a pen to the open sourced world of internet gaming.

Putting a more political angle on the idea of social networks, Tim Davies from the social media campaigning group Practical Participation continued the conversation about online communities. He explained how young people can use modern communication technologies to become active citizens in their local communities, in civic life, and in political campaigns. Campaigners can put pressure on those in power using social media, he argued, and governments can use online tools to better communicate with citizens. Tim fuelled discussion by asking the group their opinions on the role of the Internet in recent revolutions in the Middle East; if we control technology or if technology controls us; how social networks increase young people’s involvement in politics; and if online activism distracts us from getting involved in “real life” campaigns.

Participant Hannah Satlow gave a feminist perspective on how women use technology. She overviewed the history of women’s relationship to technology over the 20-21st centuries and challenged the group to think about how women engage in the media culture and how society shapes their roles. This conversation, reminded WSCF-Europe and the participants how important it is to continue to discuss issues of gender as well as have a space to safely and openly express individual views on such topics.

Martin Fisher, from the Young European Federalists, showcased the organization’s online campaigns, providing insight into how Student Christian Movements can engage online and turn ‘slackivism’ (just clicking a link to support a cause) into real change.

“The Internet can make people equal. It plays a big role in changing politics and the society. Some people can express themselves in the internet better than face to face.”

Nino Kikvadze, Georgia
Learning from One Another

There were two opportunities for participants to lead small group workshops on various topics. This gave groups the opportunities to focus in on regional issues as well as further discuss concepts presented by speakers. Noar Sahiti’s (Kosovo) workshop on Online Campaigns by Religious Extremists delved into how sects emerge and campaign online using videos and other methods. Dzmitry Bartalevic’s workshop, Internet Censorship in Belarus, sparked an in-depth discussion on online democracy, openness and repression. Nino Kikvadze and Magda Lekiashvili (Georgia) focussed on how social media and online communities have developed in Georgia. Vladyslav Vlasov & Natalia Mykytei (Ukraine) examined how we can be misled by online news reports, and used an interactive role-play to challenge ideas of what we perceive as truth or fiction. Jill Piebiak (Canada) shared a positive approach to intercultural dialogue on the Internet by showcasing art projects and online communities that create real and important communities of people. Tim Davies (UK) shared practical tips and skills on social media and youth participation.

Proud citizens of Farmville or nostalgic for the days when a blackberry was just a fruit?

In a creative workshop, participants filmed video commercials, either promoting or denouncing the use of technology. Those promoting technology used the examples of online shopping, robots, and electronic toothbrushes to show that technology improves life. Those advocating “switching off” promoted face to face conversations, time outside and closer personal relationships as the better way to live.

Excursion to Helsinki

During a visit to the Aalto University Media Factory participants met with professors, students and community members active in using social media for churches and non-profit campaigns. The group was challenged to think about the ethical challenges of branding churches and using media tools for mission. An excursion in the city gave everyone a break from the intense discussions and lectures and allowed for exploring, museums and a bit of sight seeing on the winter streets of Helsinki.

Finnish Ecumenism

Orthodox priest Heikki Huttunen gave participants an overview of the ecumenical community of Finland. Participants discovered more about ecumenism and were able to learn from the Finnish experience what it means to dialogue as a Church together.

Offline and Online communication

Intercultural dialogue was continually present at the conference. One afternoon a technology retreat was held to challenge participants to log off and spend time with one another—discussing, playing games and getting to know one another. Evenings were spent sharing food and drink and tales from everyone’s home countries which allowed time to learn more about where each person came from. The saunas, a highlight of the week, was a place to escape the busyness of the day, the wires of the computers and relax.

Throughout the conference WSCF-E used social media to share what we were learning with a wider audience. Pictures were uploaded to Facebook, lectures were shared on WSCFConnections and conference updates were instantly Tweeted.

A special thanks to our donors for making this event a success!