

Higher Education in Europe: Universities as Service Stations or Laboratories of Universal Questions?

European Regional Assembly of WSCF Europe

21–28 September 2005, Feketić, Serbia & Montenegro

Fifty-five participants from 24 countries—including delegates, lecturers, partners and senior friends—took part in the joint thematic conference/European Regional Assembly held at the end of September in Feketić, Vojvodina, the northern autonomous province of Serbia and Montenegro. This made it something of a landmark event: it was the first WSCF Europe conference to be held in the Balkans in living memory.

But the conference was memorable for many other reasons as well. First, there were the excellent lecturers: Angele Attard from the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB) speaking on "Trends in Higher Education," including a comprehensive overview of the Bologna Process; Martin Conway, a senior friend of WSCF-E, who stimulated discussion about student responsibility in shaping the university environment under the rousing banner "Explorers and Witnesses into Tomorrow's World: The Role of Student Organisations in Higher Education;" and Predrag Lazetić from the Student Union of Serbia, who gave us a perspective on the local realities of higher education in Serbia.

Amidst these inputs, we got the chance to hear case studies about the transformation processes in different regions of Europe and the rest of the world with a panel discussion presented by participants. The countries represented were Norway (Iselin Jørgensen); Germany (Thorsten Nilges); Hungary (Ildikó Lévai); Belarus (Ekaterina Levshenkova); and Cameroon (Adéle Djomo Ngomedje).

Various aspects of higher education were further developed in workshops led by the participants themselves. These workshops, according to the interests of their leaders, both broadened and narrowed the focus of the topic: from the Bologna Process in the U.K. (Dan Griffiths, Angharad Jones) and Ukraine (Miroslawa Mytsak) to the place of women in higher education (Adéle Djomo Ngomedje); and from the role of creativity in education (Lina Måndrøm) to the role of education throughout your life (Peter Šajda).

Special workshops on other topics of interest were prepared as well by some representatives of our partner organizations: Lukasz Nazarko from the World Council of Churches (WCC) spoke about ecumenical formation at the WCC Assembly in Brazil next February; and Dana Johnson, a volunteer with Frontier Internship in Mission, gave a vivid insight into her work with the women's peace movement in Serbia and Montenegro.

Aside from the thematic part came the constitutional business of the meeting, in which shape and vision of WSCF Europe was refined. Delegates met in working groups according to the four areas of emphasis of WSCF Europe—theology, culture and higher education, solidarity and gender—and formulated suggestions for a working programme in the next two years. These suggestions were fashioned into a Policy Paper which was hotly debated and ultimately approved by the assembly.

In addition to the policy paper, some minor amendments to the by-laws of WSCF-E were approved, and a new European Regional Committee (ERC) was elected to take responsibility for implementation of the recommendations of the ERA. For the first time these elections

included the newly-created position of links coordinator, as a person to oversee the development and expansion of WSCF-E's network throughout the continent.

Those elected to the ERC are: Chairperson **Alessia Passarelli**, Baptist from Italy; Vice-chairperson and member of the global Executive Committee **Morten Skrubbeltrang**, Evangelical-Lutheran from Denmark; Treasurer **Justas Brazauskas**, Reformed from Lithuania; Solidarity coordinator **Thorsten Nilges**, Roman Catholic from Germany; Theology coordinator **Bogdan Popescu**, Orthodox from Romania; Gender coordinator **Angharad Jones**, Anglican from Wales, U.K.; Culture and Higher Education coordinator **Lenka Matušková**, Roman Catholic from Slovakia; Links coordinator **Jooa Vuorinen**, Orthodox from Finland; and ExCo member **Ingjerd Jøssang**, Evangelical-Lutheran from Norway.

Even with all this education and business to take place, spiritual life was not neglected. Outgoing theology coordinator Damián Juraj Mačura prepared morning worships on the topic of "wisdom," drawn from the stories of David and Solomon, to tie in with the week's emphasis on learning and the intellectual life. We also had a Bible study one evening about discerning what the important things in life are, illustrated by the parable of the rich man from Luke 12,12-21 and by an episode of "The Simpsons" where Homer has 24 hours to live.

Evening worships were prepared by denominational groups (Evangelical-Lutheran, Roman Catholic-Anglican, and Protestant), and on Sunday we had a special introduction to Orthodox worship with an explanation of various elements in it, presented by the Orthodox participants. This was followed by a short Orthodox morning prayer led by Father Vladislav Sokhin. It was a perfect way to prepare for visiting a Serbian Orthodox evening worship later that night in Novi Sad at the end of our excursion.

On the excursion itself, we visited Novi Sad's renowned Petrovaradin Fortress, the second-largest fortification in Europe, with four levels, 16.000 metres of tunnels, and a capacity of 16.000 people when under siege. It was built originally during the Hungarian rule in the 13th century, but also served as a stronghold for the armies of Turkey (Ottoman) and Austria (Habsburg) during the tumultuous history of Vojvodina. We visited the fortress and corresponding museum, taking in the incredible view of the Danube below it, before heading into town for a short guided tour of other notable monuments and sites in Novi Sad.

Our introduction to the local culture continued two evenings later with Vojvodinian Cultural Evening, held in conjunction with the farewell party. After a short presentation of our hosting organisation, the Ecumenical Humanitarian Organisation, which comprises five churches cooperating in diaconal work and social development in Vojvodina, we moved on to the dance floor, where local musicians played traditional songs on the accordion and keyboard and participants sampled the local drink of choice-giving us a true taste of life in a multi-ethnic village in northern Serbia.

At the end of the week we finally bade each other farewell, taking with us new friendships, new responsibilities and new hopes and plans for the upcoming two years. Susciting the fervour of newcomers and renewing the commitment of the old, this conference/regional assembly marked a memorable event in the life and growth of the Federation, to which everyone present at the conference shared her or his own unique role and contribution.

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