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“If I were a migrant: Youth perspectives on migration and the  
integration of young migrants in societies”

Sassone, Italy

Conference Report

23-28 May 2007-07-26

A delicious Italian meal, beginning with a starter of pasta, gathered 40 participants from across Europe and opened the WSCF conference on „If I were a Migrant: Youth Perspectives on Migration and the Integration of Young Migrants into Society,” in Sassone, about 20 kilometres outside of Rome. After dinner, the opening evening began with icebreakers and introductions to the organisations who worked together to organise the conference, including the sponsoring organisation—the World Student Christian Federation Europe Region (WSCF Europe)—and other partners, the Churches Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME), the Federation of Protestant Churches in Italy (FCEI), Protestant Youth Federation in Italy (FGEI), and with the support of the Council of Europe and its “All equal, all different” campaign. Through initial icebreakers, participants began the week long process of building a community and safe-space together, to study and learn about migration. Unique to this conference, participants were not only from continental Europe, but many were migrants to Europe, whether from Africa, Asia, or from North America, enabling many different perspectives on migration including focuses both on the struggles of internal migrants in Europe and the struggles of migrants entering into the continent.

After breakfast on Thursday, the first full day of the conference, the hosting committee led participants in Ecumenical worship, using the liturgy from the Universal Day of Prayer for Students, which for 2007 was written by the Europe region of WSCF on migration. Following worship, an opening activity challenged participants to focus on their view points, and to engage in discussion despite differences. Participants divided into groups across the room, based on whether their answers were yes, no, or maybe. They then had to explain their views, and were given the freedom to change sides of the room if their minds were changed by another’s opinion. The controversial questions included “Is migration the biggest issue facing Europe today?,” “Is migration a problem,” and “Do you consider yourself to be a migrant?” Following the discussion resulting from this activity, participants divided into groups to brainstorm on keywords which would be the focus of the week, seeking to brainstorm on the shades of meaning behind the concepts of identity, culture, migration, integration, and youth. The posters they created as a result of the brainstorming were hung on the conference walls as reminders throughout the week.

Following a coffee break, Franca Di Lecce, director of the Service for Refugees and Migrants of the Federation of the Protestant Churches in Italy spoke on the phenomenon of migration, giving background information on the current state of migration in Italy, Europe, and globally. She emphasised that migration is a normal feature of human life, beginning biblically when Adam and Eve were evicted from the garden, and that it has neither a positive or negative connotation in itself. She raised important questions, what are solutions or answers to migration and are they needed or working?

After Franca’s presentation, Alberto Castagnola, an international economist who has worked with the Jubilee campaign to abolish third world debt and with NGOs working in Africa, spoke on the distribution of wealth in the world and how economics influences migration and perceptions of migration. He emphasised statistics on the gap between the

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wealthiest few and poorest majority, and focused on how this discrepancy fuels migration. A time of question and answers as well as discussion followed his presentation.

After lunch, the afternoon sessions began with a group activity and participants were given a list of twenty values to evaluate in groups. From these twenty values, the groups were to select the five they felt were most important and were to rank these values from most to least important. Each group was then given time to present their values in plenary, and to explain how and why they chose and ranked their selections. The groups revealed that this task was difficult, as each group consisted of intercultural and interdenominational groups (yet, the task also emphasised shared values as many found their values in line with others from different contexts within their group) and each group shared a varying list of values.

Participants then read a scenario in which one character is forced to break values in order to uphold a value that she holds to be the most important, and the various characters in the story do the same thing as a result of (or response to) her actions. The groups were asked to evaluate this story in the context of the values they selected as the most important before. After reading about the decisions made by the characters, did their group's list of values change? The groups were asked to evaluate if values depended on context and the resulting discussion extended into the afternoon, allowing concrete discussion on differences in values and challenges of various real-life situations. This exercise revealed how differences in values can result in contradictory decision-making processes, which often make integration into and within a culture challenging.

The focus of the activity was then shifted to the specific topic words discussed in the morning, allowing participants to reflect on the keywords and their connections to each other in relation to the activities of the day (using the posters created by the groups in the morning). The groups were asked to develop questions relating to the relationships between these words and the topics they represented, emphasising that all questions cannot be answered, but the questioning and evaluation process continues to be important even when answers cannot be reached.

Before dinner, participants broke into pre-assigned home groups. Each home group was given the responsibility to act like a reporter and evaluate the contents of the day. What were their reactions to the activities? What activities were helpful? What insights did they receive or not receive from the activities? After worship led by Orthodox participants and dinner, the evening began with a movement market, in which each participant could introduce and explain about the activities of their sending organisation.

After breakfast on Friday, participants boarded a train to go to Rome to visit the office of the Service for Refugees and Migrants of the Federation of Protestants Churches in Italy (FCEI). The President of FCEI, Domenico Maselli, welcomed warmly the participants and Luca Ghiretti, executive member of the Italian Student Christian Movement (FGEI) gave a short presentation about FGEI. Dafne Marzoli, member of the preparatory committee and volunteer at the Service for Refugees and Migrants, showed the office explaining the role of the Service and the activities in place to support and empowered migrants such as counselling, Italian language courses and training courses/activities for women. Participants were then led on a brief tour of the center of Rome, to enable them to better understand the local context. After lunch, at a meeting point in Villa Borgese, participants divided into groups led by Italian members of the hosting committee to explore different aspects of the city in relation to their interests.

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After the excursion, participants joined in Catholic worship before dinner in Sassone, and after dinner, the film evening began. Participants watched Spanglish, focusing on specific aspects of the movie which would influence the discussions throughout the remaining of the conference. During the film, participants were asked to evaluate the following questions in relation to migration: How is intercultural dialogue present in the film? What are the effects and techniques of dialogue in the first generation of migrants? the second? Were the results of this dialogue positive?

The third full day of the conference began with Lutheran worship before Mostafa El Ayoubii gave a lecture on Migration and Integration, which was then followed by a time of questions and answers. He examined and compared the differing methods of integration used in various European countries, namely Germany, France, and Italy, and explored other options or suggestions for more successful integration. After coffee break, Anne Marie Dupre, from the Churches Commission for Migrants in Europe gave a lecture on “Religion and Migration,” with a focus on “being Churches together.” Elaborating on the morning lecture, she explained that integration should not be defined as assimilation, and that conflicts often occur over the semantics of the words. She also explained and gave examples of how intercultural living in churches could set an example for the rest of secular society, emphasising the importance of personal and community activism in these issues.

After discussions and lunch, participants joined in and led a panel discussion focussing on migration in various contexts through out Europe. The topic was on “Emigration and Immigration--Expectations and Realities,” and participants from the United Kingdom, Sweden, Lithuania, and Romania contributed to the panel. After the panel and the resulting discussion among participants, Moses Akadimah, a migrant to Italy from Ghana shared his experiences, offering another viewpoint in addition to those presented by the panel.

Following the afternoon coffee break, participants joined workshops which were offered by participants to reflect upon the topic. Jaana Niemi from Finland led a creative workshop entitled “Transgressing the Bounds,” focusing through poetry and other creative forms on the personal experience of being caught between 2 or more cultures as a result of migration. Libor and Darina Studeny from the Czech Republic led a workshop entitled “I am different, I am lonely: Make an advantage out of diversity,” which took the form of an interview with a migrant about his/her fears and expectations while facing reality in the recipient country. Libor interviewed Darina on her experiences in Kosovo, examining the language, the culture, and the religious differences she faced, as well as the loneliness which these obstacles caused. They focused then on how to use diversity as an advantage. Annie John, who lives in Italy and is originally from India, gave a workshop entitled “Migrational Imbalance between East and West: It’s pros and cons at both ends” in which she focused on the facts of migration, its problems for both the migrant and society, and compared its positive and negative effects in both the West and East. Gariba Charles and Gyeby Kwaku led a workshop entitled “How we can help our sisters and brothers in difficulties,” and examined the challenges facing foreigners in a new culture and discussed possible solutions to these difficulties.

After the second meeting of home groups to evaluate and debrief about the day, Evangelical worship and dinner, the intercultural evening began. As a part of the evening, participants all shared together aspects of their home contexts. Many brought food and drinks to share and taught basic words, or traditional dances to the rest of the participants. Some

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participants shared skits and other historical facts. The evening provided an informal time of sharing home cultures together and learning from each participant's background.

The final full day of the conference began with ecumenical worship, followed by an interactive role-play. In the role-play participants were divided into two groups to create to different nations. One nation's culture was based on math and science, while the other was based on philosophy and poetry. These two cultures had leaders and strict ways of living. After learning and adapting to their given countries, a few participants from each country were selected to suddenly migrate, knowing nothing of the other culture of the nation they would be entering into. The resulting scenarios allowed for the exploration of many aspects of migration. The cultural differences between the two invented cultures caused problems for the migrants regarding personal space as well as food (and scientific verses philosophic cultural differences). In addition, they had to learn new ways of interacting in the two contrasting society. Contrasts between the experiences of migrating alone, or with another person or group were also shown (for migrants were more likely to keep more of their original identity if they migrated in a group than if they migrated alone). The receiving cultures were also examined, focusing on how they (if they did) welcomed the incoming migrants. How and to what extent did they try to incorporate the newcomer into their culture? Did they force the migrant to follow their roles, or did they bend them?

The role-play ended when one of the nations ran out of resources and sent a large group of migrants to the other nation in order to trade goods. The discussion of the role play extended throughout the afternoon. Many participants were able to relate their experiences in the role-play to every day life, making it a personal growing experience. The role-play allowed reflection on topics discussed throughout the week, leading into evaluation of the topic, focusing on the words used at the beginning of the week. What type of society do we live in: multicultural, intercultural, or intra-cultural? What are the differences?

Using the role-play, the key words, and our study of values, participants and organisers together evaluated the conference and the topics of migration studied. Participants filled in conference evaluations, and using a creative method, revealed pictorially the effectiveness of different activities through marking on a large target. After coffee break, participants then broke into groups to plan the final worship and the closing party later in the evening.

After worship and dinner, participants gathered for a time of games, dancing and sharing together, a fitting end of celebration to bring closure to the week of studying, learning, and growing together as a community. The conference ended on Monday, after breakfast when participants began to depart. In totality, the week provided a safe place to share and learn together, and many expressed the desire to continue their involvement on both the topic and in WSCF events.

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