From 25 to 30 May, 2009, participants from throughout Eastern Europe gathered for the WSCF-E Lingua Franca seminar, Religious Freedom as a Human Right, in Lviv, Ukraine. After the opening ecumenical worship, icebreakers began to foster the community for the week. Imitating popular online forums, participants created and shared “profiles” to begin to get to know each other. Two traditional Ukrainian bands sang and played to welcome all to Ukraine and the seminar.

**Human Rights**

In an opening session, Svitlanna Tymchenko, from Ukraine, gave a lecture on human rights. What are they? Who has them? What mechanisms are there in society to protect human rights? All then joined in a human thermometer exercise, judging whether or not they thought various scenarios were examples of the human right of religious freedom. Some of the scenarios included: A female living in an Islamic country does not want to wear her veil when she leaves the house. And vice versa, a Muslim women living in Western Europe wishes to where here veil to work. Is this her right? A Christian psychologist decides that he cannot counsel a homosexual couple because of his religious beliefs. Is this his right? A priest refuses to give communion to a church member. Is it the right of the church member to receive communion? Scientologists wish to rent the town hall for a conference; is this their right? These exercises fuelled much discussion of the topic of religious freedom as a human right.

Other discussions throughout the week also focused on the question of our role and responsibility to protect the religious freedom of those who we do not agree with as well as on our responsibility to campaign and challenge societal structures that restrict human rights.

**Religious Freedom**

Geraldine Fagan, a reporter on religious freedom issues for Forum 18 News Service, gave a lecture on monitoring religious freedom. Forum 18 reports on topics of religious freedom in former Soviet States and they can be found on the web at forum18.org. She discussed definitions of religious freedom, gave examples from her work, and revealed many ways that governments, often through complicated bureaucracy, are able to restrict freedoms.

To further reflect upon the topic of religious freedom from differing national contexts, participants joined in a panel discussion. Boris Bachvarov and Kamelia Slavcheva presented on the situation in Bulgaria, Irakli Tskhadadze and Mariam Gavtadze on Georgia, Natalka Vasilevich and Andrey Kim on Belarus, and Jooa Vuorinen on Finland.

What is our role as Christians to protect the religious freedom of others? Is religious freedom inherent, or not, in Christianity? Chris Howson, an Anglican priest from the UK, led a discussion and bible study on this topic. Scriptures ranging from the Israelites taking over the land of Canaan to the story of Jesus and the Samaritan Women, the story of the Good Samaritan, and the persecution of Jesus himself in his hometown were reflected upon.

Dina Shavtsova, a lawyer from Belarus, led a session examining current actions for religious freedom. She explained two opposing Christian arguments for participating (or not) in political campaigns: one is that “God sees all and will protect” so I do not need to act, and the other follows the example of Paul in Acts, when he used his rights to call for justice, expressing “I have the rights of a Roman citizen”. Dina spoke about the efforts to campaign against the current “code of administrative offences” in Belarus because without fundamental rights of association and expression, freedom of religion also is not be possible. Laws to protect religious freedom would thus not be enough, as the political system itself would need to be changed to protect all basic rights. She expressed that this is not only a problem affecting suppressed religious organisations but affecting all. Though the administrative code is enforced today, the campaign helped to raise awareness about the situation in Belarus revealed the importance of and need for work to raise the awareness of the general public.
Training in Campaigning

Chris Howson, together with Matt Gardner and Rachael Weber, led sessions on nonviolent campaigning. Beginning with a conflict line exercise where all were instructed to “get their partner to their side of the line”, all examined the use of force and violence as an instinct before studying how nonviolence can be a tool for change. In another exercise participants evaluated the effectiveness of various violent or nonviolent solutions to problems, fuelling much discussion. Using bible study, nonviolent resistance was examined and then applied to daily life and current situations.

In another session, participants examined the need for networking to raise awareness on an issue. Using two examples of campaigns, from Belarus and Georgia, all examined a spectrum of allies. One must first be able to identify allies and how different parts society view an issue before moving on to answer these questions: How can you raise awareness and mobilise those who perhaps are not yet aware of an issue? How can you put pressure on, or change the minds of, those who oppose?

Following the spectrum exercise, Andrey Kim told about his experiences as a political prisoner in Belarus and the helpful effect of letter campaigns both personally as he was in prison and concretely as they helped to raise awareness about his situation and aided him in his release. The situation of the New Life Church in Belarus, in which the government is working to take away their property, was then presented to participants, and all had the opportunity to write letters in solidarity.

To close these sessions, participants together created a joint statement on religious freedom and a piece of street theatre on the topic.

Unifying Ties

Throughout the week participants joined in ecumenical and denominational worships, sharing in each other's traditions. Matt Gardner led language lessons each day, using news stories to provide concrete practice in English.

On the intercultural evening participants all shared stories, songs and games, as well as food and drinks, from their home cultures. To further experience the context on the venue, all went on a tour of Lviv and had dinner together at a traditional restaurant.

Further emphasising the theme of nonviolent resistance for human rights, the film, *Romero*, about the life of Oscar Romero, a Catholic archbishop who was killed for his work for the human rights of the poor in El Salvador, was shown and discussed one evening.

Going Out

On the final day, participants completed a statement on religious freedom and performed the skit they created on religious freedom. In the beginning of this skit, a tree representing religious freedom stands firmly rooted. Then, when an Muslim women's veil is violently removed while praying, the tree becomes shaky. A young Christian, who is crossing herself as she prays, is forced to stop, and the tree becomes shakier still. A Buddhist is then forced to stop meditating also, and the tree is in danger of falling. Then, all three people, whose rights were violated, unite around the tree. In a circle, together, their oppressor is no longer able to force them to stop practising their faiths, and the tree is firmly rooted once again.

During the farewell party, all wrote messages reflecting on the time spent together on the “walls” of the profiles of other participants created on the first day. All left after breakfast on Saturday morning.

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