

EUROPEAN SECRETARY'S REPORT 1990/91

to the

EAY GENERAL ASSEMBLY, MAY 1992

(By Dölf Weder)

1. Some Global Perspectives

The last year in Europe has been characterized by two extremes.

In the first half of the year 1990, the prevailing feeling was a *feeling of hope and optimism*. The Wall had come tumbling down. In the countries of Central and Eastern Europe exciting new developments had started. The cold war was being buried. The European citizens started to adapt to a new, post-cold-war thinking. The process culminated during the November meeting of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in the Declaration of Paris.

But on these feelings of hope and optimism, sometimes even of euphoria, a *serious damper* has been put in the second half of the year and in the beginning of 1991.

Firstly, it became obvious that in the Soviet Union the conservative powers are still quite strong. Perestroika and Glasnost suffered more and more difficulties. The economical situation deteriorated fast. And an outstanding politician like Schewardnadse drew the danger of a new dictatorship on the wall. The process culminated in violence and death in the Baltic States. The situation in the USSR is still in a very critical stage.

While the Europeans concentrated so much on their own developments, in August they became suddenly aware again that we live today in an interrelated world. At the beginning of August, Iraq occupied the independent country of Kuwait. Months of brutal terror, torture and neglect of the most basic human rights followed. The whole world was confronted with a new discussion about the use of power and war as a means to reject aggression and to keep or establish more peace. While the allied troops reached a quick military victory, the counterbalance is an enormous number of killed, wounded and psychologically deeply disturbed people, many of them young people. The dramatic developments continued with the uprising in the South and in the North of Iraq and led to a refugee disaster with hundred thousands of people suffering. Many of them children and young people. Will all this terrific misery and all these sacrifices lead at least finally to more, and more just, peace in the region? While the question sounds almost cynical in view of such a human tragedy, we can only deeply hope and pray so.

What are some of the lessons European YMCAs can learn from this so dramatic year?

At first, I think we have to take serious our *Christian faith and theology*. Believing that the Kingdom of God can be established by humankind alone is simply an illusion. We live in this world in the ambivalence of love and hate, of life and death, of the new creation in Christ and the old patterns of Adam and Kain. All euphoria, but also all black pessimism simply forget that the Kingdom of God is already now being established in this world, but that its completion is still very much outstanding and cannot be produced by man alone. Living in the middle of the ambivalence of this world, but being deeply involved in the

extension of His Kingdom is the permanent task and mission of the YMCA in the middle of today's world.

A second lesson is the fact that *the world is deeply interrelated*. "Do not ask for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee", said John Donne already in the 17th century. The Gulf war reminded the Europeans that the new European house needs big windows and open doors. The big conflicts of tomorrow are not East-West conflicts, but North-South conflicts; or to say it more provocative: the conflicts between the "haves" and the "have nots". The big number of migrants and asylum seekers in Europe is only a small sign of this. In the Gulf war it became obvious that today's unsolved problems are the seeds for tomorrow's world conflicts and wars. And this leads us to the third lesson for the Europeans.

The values of *justice, peace and integrity of creation* cannot be separated. Peace without justice or peace without freedom is not peace. Already the Old Testament knew about this fact. And therefore the Hebrew word "Shalom" (peace) means much more than only the absence of killing weapons. The silence that follows the death of young boys and girls who have been tortured and killed is not peace. The silence that follows the death of young boys and girls who have starved to death is not peace. It is also obvious from the burning oil fields of Kuwait that the integrity of creation is not secured or re-established by more catalyst cars in European countries alone.

The YMCA as a Christ-centred world movement is challenged to educate its members in *global thinking*. Global thinking that is directed towards global justice, peace and integrity of creation. Or to say it in theological language: The YMCA is called to extend the universal Kingdom of God in all its aspects.

2. Some European Perspectives

Europe is still *growing together in a very high pace*. Some key-words are EC '92, Negotiations about a European Economical Space (EES), the process of the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and Hungary as the first Eastern European country that has become full member of the Council of Europe. The trend towards convergence is obvious. But the institutional shape of tomorrow's Europe is still to be developed. What will be the place of the countries in Central and Eastern Europe in a new Europe? Will there be a further true democratisation of the EC structures? Is there a chance for federalism and a Europe of the regions? And what is the role of youth in that new Europe? These are some of the questions asking for answers and action. And for YMCA influence.

But interesting enough, as a counterbalance to all these unifying trends, we also observe a growing awareness of and a pride about the *European diversity*. Where it does not turn into destroying nationalism or even racism, this richness is one of the positive historical gifts of Europe. There are many European cultures, a multitude of European languages and connected ways of thinking and feeling. The Gulf war and the reactions of the different European countries has also revealed once again the diversity of political convictions, attitudes and traditions. Luckily enough, most of them are based on strong common values like Human Rights, Self-Determination and Democracy.

It is one of the big contributions the YMCA can make for tomorrow's Europe: to let young people in Europe experience their specific gifts and contributions; and help them to integrate themselves into a *multi-cultural European YMCA* and into a *multi-cultural Europe* as a whole. A Europe which is based on mutual acceptance, tolerance and enrichment.

Secularisation can be observed in most countries. Astonishing enough, church attendance in some Eastern European regions is significantly higher than in many so called Christian countries in the West. While a death of religion is out of question and even discussion, we observe the growth of *new religiousness* and *new forms of spirituality* especially in the age group of older teenagers and younger adults. Official churches have extreme difficulties in coping with this phenomenon. Too much are they fixed in their traditional ways of acting, teaching and celebrating. And also many YMCAs seem to have big problems in dealing with today's young people's religiousness and spirituality.

One of the difficulties is certainly the *wide range of today's religious expressions*: Everything can be found from a new fundamentalism and conservatism over a strongly politically engaged theology to free forms of house-circle spirituality and to a liberal, secularized theology or a new-age religiousness up to obvious forms of occultism. The whole situation is complicated by the wide range of traditional confessions and their particularities. More and more also non-Christian religions have to be taken into consideration: the fast worldwide growth of Islam, the influence of Asian religions etc, which demand for a honest inter-faith dialogue. All these developments together mean an enormous challenge for an open and ecumenical, but clearly Christ-rooted movement like the YMCA.

But the YMCA as an organisation does not experience easy times during these days. Many *welfare-states are trying to cut down their social expenditures* or at least make them conditional on certain governmental rules. Signs of recession cover the skies. Many of our National Movements are presently experiencing severe financial problems due to such effects. This is also reflected in the financial restrictions of the European Alliance. The European Secretariat works with an absolutely minimal number of employees: two persons for the whole of Europe, in a time of such dynamic developments!

Emphasis can be put at National and European level on one or both of the following two strategies: trying to tap on more European institutional money and work on sponsorships, or activating - or re-activating - our own YMCA members. During the times of strong welfare-state-support, many of our YMCA members have forgotten or not learnt to make personal sacrifices out of their own pocket. Of course it is important to find and use outside funds. But on a long-term perspective, the YMCA will not be able to survive as a youth *movement* without personal sacrifices. The experiences the European Alliance makes in the field of Intermovement Cooperation Funding suggests that National Movements should work hard on the second strategy, the *activation and mobilisation of their local members*.

3. Some EAY Perspectives

With the last remarks, we have been moving to some specific YMCA developments. Details will be dealt with in the Committee reports. Here are only some overall remarks.

Looking at the European Alliance, we can certainly say that *the EAY has changed very much* during the last year.

It was not so much the baton change from one European Secretary to a new one and moving the office. The really big change came about because the number of EAY members moved from 21 in 1989 to more than 30 in today's reality. Today, YMCA work does exist again in most countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

The effect of this development is not only a bigger number of National Movements to be handled by the same EAY structure and by the same number of professional staff as

before. It demands much more: This dynamic development demands a *completely new thinking* from all our Committees and National Movements. For any international activity, it has to be kept in mind that Central and Eastern European YMCAs do exist and that their contributions, concerns and needs have to be included in any action.

Intermovement Cooperation must not be limited to some fund raising activities with national governments or church bodies. Nor is Intermovement Cooperation a matter of a committee only. Intermovement Cooperation means a *true partnership* with YMCA partner movements. All partners have their needs. But all partners can also share many gifts.

Not all of our National Movements and Committees have already realized in full what kind of fundamental change in thinking, and what amount of solidarity and mobilisation, is required from them. This is even more true for local YMCAs. The *activation and mobilisation of local YMCAs for Intermovement Cooperation and true European partnership in its widest sense* has not yet happened to a satisfactory extent and remains a big task for all National Movements. Help your local YMCAs to think internationally - which, by the way, is more than only European!

Having mentioned this big task ahead of all of us, we can surely express the European Alliance's great gratitude and warm thanks for all the support that has been experienced so far in the field of IMC. Many National Movements have supported the IMC process not only with funds, but also with substantial input of personnel. Without, for example, the hard work of the new IMC Field Group Leaders and the IMC Consultants, the EAY would be absolutely unable to cope with the enormous task. Specially mentioned should be the YMCA of the USA; they cooperate now with the EAY since several years in true partnership.

Intermovement Cooperation is surely at present *priority number one* of the European Alliance. The EAY is on a good way. But the challenge is enormous, and we call on each and every National Movement to join us and unite their efforts with those of all other partners - for the benefit of hundreds and thousands of young people in Europe.

In the field of *Programmes*, we become more and more aware that it is not enough for our Programme Committees to produce, mostly successfully, European events only. Required is a new *dynamic and innovative thinking* which leads to better *exchange of existing know-how* and to *common development of new methods and activities*. *Leadership development* on international level will play a key role. All European activities have to be measured at the end of the day strictly by the effects they produce on local level. The EAY is a support organisation and not an end in itself. In this sense also the programme field could be called "Intermovement Cooperation". Because that is what we need: a much bigger cooperation among our National Movements in various fields. A big obstacle and limitation is the fact that the EAY works - due to the lack of personnel and finances on European level - with a kind of "volunteer" system, whereby national and local staff have to fulfil European tasks besides their own, often heavy work loads. We owe all of them sincere thanks. But it is very doubtful whether an EAY with this working structure is able to cope with the challenges of today's and tomorrow's Europe.

Representation in international bodies was a weak working field of the EAY in the last few years. It happened without proper concept and coherence. A new system with a chief-representative and senior- and junior-representatives tries to develop a *coherent policy* and to *strengthen YMCA's influence* in international bodies.

In the field of *Christian Orientation*, progress is encouraging. Two workshops produced a paper "*Christian Orientation - Some Signposts for the '90s*". It is now up to the National Movements to make good use of the document and to try to stimulate through it the

discussion on Christian Orientation in their own movement. A second element in the Christian Orientation process is the work on the *truly ecumenical character* of the European YMCAs. Further progress is still required. The question of *Inter-Faith Dialogue* with special reference to the Muslims in Europe and their role in the YMCA will have to be approached in the future as well.

Overlooking all these developments, the EAY can be satisfied with process and progress. The EAY owes *gratitude* to all the many people who support throughout the whole year its work. But above all, the EAY owes deep gratitude to our Lord who uses the European YMCAs as a means for the extension of His Kingdom.

Having mentioned many positive aspects and a lot of progress made, I nevertheless do not want to hide that in my opinion the EAY in its actual shape *is not able to cope with all the challenges* with which the European YMCAs are confronted today. The time for an intensive *discussion on EAY strategies for the '90s* has come. This is an important agenda item for this General Assembly, and I want to make my respective comments in my input-statement to the strategy discussion.

Anyway, challenges are many. And it is clear: they can only be met in close cooperation and partnership with all National Movements. The EAY as an organisation is a weak body. But the European YMCAs can be strong if they unite all their efforts. Not to create or sustain a European YMCA bureaucracy, but to support *European activities that become relevant and visible on local, on grassroots level*. This is the great task and mission of the European YMCAs: *to extend the Kingdom of God among young people*.

We are all part of it.