

SECRETARY GENERAL'S SPEECH

YMCA EUROPE. GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2011

"OPEN ROAD"

I. STARTING OUT

Since I officially started serving as Secretary General of YMCA Europe last March 1st, I knew that one of the most anticipated moments would be the delivery of my first speech at our General Assembly.

As I started to write my speech, a strange idea crossed my mind. It seems that anyone in my position should be able to speak with authority about all sorts of issues related with social transformation, theology, involvement of young people, multiculturalism, or movement development, combining those topics with others such as sustainability, strategic planning, the efficient use of new technologies, resource mobilization

At least from a cultural point of view and coming from a Southern European country with a solid Latin-Mediterranean background, the fact of speaking about many different topics should not be too difficult for me. They said that one of the abilities of some Mediterranean people is their capacity of talking during long hours about one particular topic to finish saying : *"Well, this is my point of view about this issue, but I am not a specialist and I may be wrong!"*. Do not worry, I will not do that today.

If we talk about stereotypes about Spanish people, maybe one of the most known is that there has always been tension between our country and England. It all started with the disaster of "the Armada". Even today for some people it may look strange to have the two main positions in an institution occupied by an English person and a Spaniard!

Anyway, I have always have a great respect for the persons able to talk in depth about a variety of topics. It is fascinating. In my life I somehow have had the ability of gathering groups of persons in which both diversity and knowledge were very visible. I often think about the advice that once my father gave me : *“Always have in your teams people who have more experience and are more knowledgeable than you. Maybe by working with them you will be one day as successful, experienced and wise as they are”*.

Therefore I am very glad and feel privileged that I can now stand humble in your presence, feeling we will walk side by side building new things together within the next years.

My purpose today is to tell you about the vision, priorities and thoughts of the person who has been chosen to serve as your Secretary General and I will do that in the second part of my sharing when we approach the “open road”.

During the interview process for this position, I was fortunate to be giving the opportunity of explaining to the Search Committee what we could call “a plan for YMCA Europe”. During the past few months I realized that my thoughts are aligned with the vision of the Executive Committee and in my conversations with many of you, I also noticed a high level of mutual understanding. That has been truly encouraging and I thank you for your trust and support.

I am able to say already that it should not be difficult following the mandates of the Executive Committee and also your guidelines as we all seem to want to move in the same direction. Probably we do not start out from the same point, but we all look for a clear, wide, “open road”.

In many of our countries, the first 100 days of someone in a new position can somehow relate to the first days of a newly married couple : it is almost like a honeymoon. You generally go on a special trip, romanticism and sweetness are around you, the atmosphere is relaxed and the couple feels that they are living the best days of their lives together. Mutual understanding, love and caring are present every day, every moment.

Well, I am very glad that my first speech is delivered within those first 100 days! I can feel that atmosphere of acceptance and I see those looks of high expectations among you. By the end of this General Assembly, exactly on Sunday, my 100 first days will be over and I would understand that you do not need to continue being so nice with me.... Although it would be really fantastic if you would.... at least until the probation period is finished by the end of this year!

In fact these three months have changed many aspects of my life and my perception of the role that someone in my position can play. It is a quite a strange feeling as you experience that somehow you do not belong to a special place in particular and you seem to belong to everywhere. You are expected to think, to speak and to act representing many others.

Within the last weeks I have been in Prague, Litomysl, Bratislava, Pristina, Geneva, Kassel, Anaheim in the US and, of course, in Madrid. And in each of those places I had the same feeling I am having now. Persons - all of you, friends and colleagues - looking at me with that acceptance look, in an optimistic mood and with smiles in many faces. That wonderful "honeymoon feeling" again.

I must recognize that I appreciate that attitude very much but I am also aware that there are high expectations behind that warm welcome. This makes me feel deeply responsible and I take my new job with even a greatest respect. Respect for the institution I represent and also for each of the persons that are part of it.

Talking about expectations, it reminds me of that story of a tourist that enters a pet shop because he wants to buy a monkey. The owner of the shop shows him the first monkey which price is 5.000 euros but the surprised tourist asks him why it costs so much. The shopkeeper says : *"You see, the monkey is quite smart, it learns very fast, it has no bugs and it can even be trained to take care of your home"*. The tourist sees another monkey even more expensive – 10.000 € - and he wonders why. The shopkeeper says : *"Well, it can manage object-oriented programming, it is very good in strategic planning and it can speak three languages"*. Suddenly the tourist noticed a third monkey in a cage of its own. The price

around his neck was 50.000 €. Extremely surprised, the tourist asks : *“That one costs more than the others put together! What on earth does it do?”*
“Well – says the owner of the shop – it has been here for almost 100 days and I haven’t actually seen it do anything yet but it says that it’s a European Secretary General of a non profit organization!”

There were high expectations also in that case!

Yes, high expectations because most of us in this room know that YMCA Europe is now at a crossroads. It is a fact that we are changing. It is a natural process that all organizations must go through sooner or later – I am sure that most of you have experienced that at your national movements or at the local level – and in many cases, you were key persons in those changes.

Adapting to new realities is not an unknown process for YMCA Europe. Over the last 38 years, we were able to adapt our structure, initiatives, methodology and technical abilities to face new challenges as also Europe itself was changing. From less than 20 National Movements only two decades ago, we now integrate 35 national YMCAs plus 7 cooperating Movements. A huge adaptation of our own reality has taken place and we must be proud of keeping the same identity and guiding principles.

We – all of us here and our predecessors – have made our best in order to keep the unity of our European family as it continued to grow. This is a great achievement and we must always remember it. Coming from a movement like Spain I was able to experience that myself.

In 1985 I was a young man giving my first steps as a volunteer in Salamanca, a historic and cultural city in Western Spain. Together with a small group of friends we were struggling against the lack of participation of a civil society that had been asleep for decades during a non democratic regime. Our goal was to create a local YMCA in the city. One of the few references about the Y.M.C.A. that many people had in that area of the country was the song by Village People that had been so popular just a few years before.

For several weeks after class, we gathered to design a social project whose beneficiaries would be intellectually handicapped young students at the Reina Sofia Special Education Centre. In our opinion we managed to write

the best possible project : an accurate analysis of reality, an excellent planning of weekly social, cultural and recreational activities, a creative way to integrate those beneficiaries into society, the best evaluation system and a modest but quite realistic budget. We were proud of our project. The bright red Y.M.C.A. initials were on the cover of the document. In fact, we were so proud that we decided to take it to the local government to ask for some financial support. After several weeks without an answer, some of us decided to go back to the city hall to enquire. The public servant that received us, shook his head and said : “Ah yes, YMCA...” and he opened one of the drawers of his desk, took out our project and added “I am sorry, we do not have resources for bands that play American disco music, maybe you should try the Department of Culture”

Obviously he had not even opened the project!

Today, after more than 25 years, the YMCA of Salamanca develops a vast range of programmes for children and youth and one of the most significant ones takes place at the Reina Sofia Special Education Centre.

My good friends Terry Ratcliffe and Egon Slopianka can share with you many other good stories about those years in which they were both strongly involved in the development of our “Southern adventures”.

I am sure that many of you, especially those representing young YMCA movements across Europe have special, incredible stories about the first steps of our association in contexts in which things are not always easy for a civil society organization with a Christian ecumenical identity, involving young people.

For those of you who come to the General Assembly for the first time or have just stated your involvement at the international level of our movement, these are the three advices I humbly share with you : ask questions, ask for those genuine histories that took place across Europe and ask how challenges were overcome. Having several generations of committed “YMCA-Europeans” here is a privilege and a learning opportunity for you as it has always been for me. It says a lot about the way YMCA Europe honours the former presidents, secretary generals, Executive Committee members and everyone who contributed to our growth and impact.

We had to adapt to so many contexts and this has been an exciting journey with such an extraordinary commitment of so many persons in Southern, Central, Western, Northern and Eastern Europe. But in addition, society and other public and private institutions also had to adapt to the continuous and growing presence of the YMCA.

*“If you have faith as a mustard seed... nothing will be impossible for you”
Mathew 17:20*

Now we continue adapting as we move forward. Apart from the fact of having a new Secretary General, YMCA Europe will also implement the new Strategy that will hopefully be approved during this General Assembly. The process that led us to have the new strategy has already been quite different and we must thank everyone involved : the Executive Committee, our President Peter Posner, my predecessor Johan Vilhelm Eltvik, our Deputy Secretary General Michal Szymanczak, our European staff, the National Secretary Generals, the leaders of the field and programme groups and especially all of you representing national movements. Thank you for your valuable contributions!

We will focus on the Strategy during this General Assembly. After its presentation by our President Peter Posner, we will share thoughts about an efficient and appropriate way to implement our plan.

We will also listen to keynote speakers that will concentrate on our main pillars just before all of us have new opportunities to reflect and debate on how to make those topics relevant in our contexts. All of this will happen during these days, here at Ernst Sillem Hoeve, and it will be a crucial moment in our history with decisions to be made in our continuous search for being relevant, inclusive, sustainable and able to empower young people.

II. GETTING ON

Dear friends : I cannot think about a better moment to start actively serving at YMCA Europe. I am enthusiastic about the approval and implementation of a new strategy that is 100% aligned with the way I understand our movement and the role that a platform like YMCA Europe should adopt.

Just a few days ago I was invited to explain the main highlights of our plan to a group of YMCA members, volunteers and staff, gathered at the International Forum held in Kassel, Germany.

The group inspired me because of their diversity, spiritual strength and international perspective. Many of the participants were young people which soon created one of those “classical YMCA atmospheres” that all of us often experience. I used a real opened umbrella symbolizing our wish to integrate the many sensitivities and realities across Europe. When I turned the umbrella upside down without closing it, I talked about our openness to receive feedback from different contexts and cultural realities. We want to be able to provide answers, responding to challenges and being relevant for all our member movements as it is clearly stated in our Mission Statement :

“... Our main function is the support, representation and development of its members”.

Based on all of these thoughts and considering the developments that took place at YMCA Europe since we last met one year ago, Michal Szymanczak kindly accepted my invitation to share with all of us the main achievements of our working fellowship during 2010. And I am very happy to take this opportunity to express my personal and professional gratitude to Michal for his work and commitment as our Acting Secretary General for more than a semester last year and in the first months of 2011. His sensitivity, attitude and professionalism have been crucial for a smooth and effective transition benefiting our European movement and myself.

May I also ask you to congratulate each of the members of YMCA Europe staff for their committed work and professional development over that challenging period. Eva Tschornova, Martina Hudcovska, Sarka Cihakova, Radek Hlavsa, Mikhail Guskov, Vardan Hambardzumyan, Adam Rychlik and Marius Pop.

MICHAL SZYMANCZAK :

Presentation of the 2010 Annual Report.
Main achievements and testimonies from participants at YMCA Europe events and initiatives.

Thank you, Michal.

I find it challenging to get used to the specific terminology and the numerous initials that we have at YMCA Europe. We invented our own language with a large number of abbreviations and this a good example of our creativity and also of the rich diversity of our initiatives.

As an example :

EAY, COG, ESY, EP, ETS, FG, GA, LA, MD, NC, NGS, NM, PG, SG, TC, YERT, TTT....

When preparing for my interview last November, I remember spending long hours memorizing the words behind those letters, and even the composition of each of the Field and Partner groups, the names and countries of our Executive Committee members and staff, etc.

There were no questions about none of these topics during the interviews! The questions concentrated on the future of YMCA Europe and in my vision, but it is worth it now to remember some of the key factors that I learned about our reality :

- 5.561 local YMCAs in Europe, reaching close to 2 million persons. Nearly 80.000 volunteers and more than 10.000 employees.
- Through programmes our local YMCAs are able to touch and even change the lives of 2 million persons – most of them young – every year.
- Everyday our centers become homes for thousands of people not only seeking a roof but also the warm friendship and acceptance of others.
- Everyday our local YMCAs become places in which the word of Jesus is alive and active through many different initiatives that make visible the Kingdom of God.
- Everyday we integrate youth coming from different cultural, religious and social contexts into our activities and dynamics.
- Everyday we open our facilities in the mountains or near the rivers and lakes, providing safe spaces of sharing, growing and learning for thousands of people, helping them to enjoy and respect nature.
- Everyday we facilitate the active participation of volunteers that contribute to lead our YMCAs in the local, regional, national and international levels and also to take responsibilities in social programmes.
- Everyday we empower young people, giving them the space, the tools and the training in order to make them active members of our movement and of their societies.
- Everyday we design and implement programmes focused on youth and based on employment, health, positive occupation of leisure time and recreation.
- Everyday we seek for peace in many areas of our continent still affected by conflicts or post conflict issues, through the planning and development of seminars, festivals and leadership training initiatives.

- Everyday many of our local YMCAs gather and inspire groups of ten singers, scouts and youth leaders able to create networks as they grow in their capacity to participate actively in the life of the association.
- Everyday we fight against discrimination, being inclusive for all : migrants, people with severe disabilities, people in hospitals, homeless people, those who are unemployed.
- Every day we deal with issues such as gender, integration of minorities, environmental education, fair trade, international cooperation for development and many others.
- Everyday we train and provide opportunities to thousands of young people who become special citizens and are the real builders of the Europe that we all dream of based on social justice, understanding and peace.

We do this each day and we have done it for decades in 42 countries across Europe. The YMCA responds to concrete needs being able to adapt to such a diverse often challenging European realities that go from the Atlantic coasts to Siberia and from the Baltic to the Mediterranean basin.

Last May 9th as I celebrated Europe Day at the Seat of the European Commission in Madrid, the Head of this Representation in Spain told me :

“The YMCA hast the two main ingredients to be strongly relevant and a reference in Europe : a unique network of thousands of local realities and the involvement of young people”.

We were able to innovate throughout history as we struggled to serve more and better in the frame of our mission and guiding principles emphasizing the Christian identity of the YMCA as an ecumenical lay movement.

III. TURNING POINT

Europe is also at a crossroads. The economic and financial crisis and the significant changes in the employment structure are aspects that all of us can clearly see in each of our countries.

An internal market and the single currency has provided certain sustainability to a number of countries but it also represents a challenge for many other European nations that still struggle to provide a solid ground that will allow civil society to develop in a holistic way. For example, in many of our neighbour countries the different levels of development have slowed down the consolidation of democratic institutions.

Some of you in this room face this and many other difficulties in your daily life and especially as you try to make your YMCAs more visible, coherent and strong.

Here are just a few examples on how Europe – through its institutions and civil society – is facing those challenges :

On December 1st 2009, the Treaty of Lisbon was approved by the European Union as a way to take Europe into the 21st century with proposals to respond to citizens' demands and needs. The document refers to young people as crucial members of society and already able to become active social agents of transformation.

The Treaty focuses on topics like freedom and justice, health, civic protection, climate change, humanitarian aid, sport and tourism converting the European Union in a more visible partner for developing countries and international organizations.

Institutional changes in a context of an economic crisis are slow in countries in which we are present. But the YMCA has not stopped despite of these difficulties and in many places we are now in the best possible position to consolidate our work and increase our impact. This is the case,

for instance, of the Kosovo YMCA and I will never forget a group of children performing a short play about gender violence led by YMCA volunteers in a school of Mitrovica just a few weeks ago.

The Eurobarometer poll 2009 tells us that only 52% of the citizens of EU member states “believe in God”. The reality of secularization in Europe is combined with the existence of Muslim majorities in the South and East of Europe together with other religions like Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism in areas of Britain and France.

Identities and cultures are closer than ever, even with the risk of falling into tensions and the temptation of imposing one way of thinking over the other. The so called “clash of civilizations” is a constant threat and there is an increasing need for spaces in which mutual respect, integration and understanding are priorities. As Christians, we are called to actively work from an ecumenical perspective, becoming living examples through the way we address these issues and our attitude towards others.

According to a study by Eurochild, an institution promoting the welfare and rights of children and teenagers in Europe, these two groups have a risk of poverty of 19%. As a matter of fact about the 10% of our population in Europe – including the countries non members of the EU – live under the effects of poverty. This represents more than 80 million people.

Social exclusion does not only mean poverty. It can be applied to anyone affected by the inadequate realization of social rights. This means issues related to persistent unemployment, delinquency, changes in the family structure, as well as persons with mental and physical disabilities, aged, abused children, migrants...

“Truly I say to you, as you did to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” Matthew 25:40

2010 was the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion and 2011 is the European Year of Volunteering. We have those two topics in our agendas either at the local, or at the national or at the international levels. Now it is time to lift our daily realities, making them more visible and actively searching for agreements with public bodies and other institutions.

The European Commission is now implementing the Strategy Europe 2020 under the title *“An European strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth”* and we see a very close relation with our own Strategy 2011-16. There is a clear “turning point” in the way civil society and European institutions are facing the most relevant topics that should increase the level of social justice and solidarity for all.

YMCA Europe is also shifting towards a more pan-European, inclusive and socially relevant dimension. National Movements stressed those aspects as their contribution to the new Strategy. In 1991 YMCA Europe had to change and adapt to the new European reality and needs. Just like it is happening in public bodies over the last 20 years, also YMCA Europe had to integrate new realities under the “umbrella” welcoming them into the family and helping provide the ingredients for a coherent and sustainable growth. This was a huge effort involving many of you who still contribute personally and help us attracting new partners.

Now it is time to work on a more uniform way providing attention and answers also to all national movements across Europe, to all our members. This idea is linked with the fact that Europe is less and less divided into the Northern, Southern, Eastern, Western or Central “boxes”. Those geographic concepts – often related to unfair stereotypes – have slowly started to disappear already as the integration of new states takes place.

The dream of “one Europe” when we talk about rights, equal opportunities and social justice for all its citizens must also connect with the idea of “one YMCA movement in Europe” whilst preserving and strengthening the rich national and local realities.

This also applies for young people. In fact, it especially applies to youth. A typical 18 year old from Russia has much more in common with an 18 year old from The Netherlands than two 40 year olds, one living in Manchester and the other one in Liverpool, England. It is much easier for the two young people to communicate, network and agree on the way they see the world according to their interests and expectations.

IV. OPEN ROAD

We came a long way and we gained strength in our diversity since we took our first steps. Now we have an open road in front of us and we must continue walking side by side.

YMCA Europe as a structure depends on you and we ask you to continue to help holding the “umbrella”. The same way national movements must be in the heart of YMCA Europe, I challenge you to create spaces for YMCA Europe at each of the national, regional and local YMCAs. More than ever, the local, national and international levels are called to work in a coordinated way to tackle the challenges that we have as a movement but especially to provide answers and participation for “young Europe”.

YMCA Europe would not exist without the local and national realities led by you. But the local and national YMCAs would be missing an essential part of their dimension if they do not create those spaces for YMCA Europe. Our road is long but it is wide enough for all of us.

We now have an open road to make a sustainable YMCA Europe, depending not only on fees and partial resources coming from grants for programmes, but also securing funds to cover our costs and our own initiatives.

It is time to plan and implement new ways of supporting our structure, programmes and network. Starting with new ways of explaining our committed partners and good friends “what we do, how we do it and the impact our actions have”.

Our own sustainability and strength will increment our capacity to serve better and in a more efficient way to our national movements. Many eyes are looking at us for inside and from outside the European movement but also from our civil society. Let us fulfill expectations working in a coherent and sustainable way without losing our identity.

Sustainability, with a long term perspective, will also continue to facilitate the extension of the YMCA across Europe with an emphasis on the areas and places in which our message is more needed.

We have an open road that leads us to new agreements with public and private institutions. This will help us diversifying our resources allowing us to do more as we focus on the implementation of our mission. This will also be excellent news for our “Friends of YMCA Europe” who will feel more as a crucial part of a combined effort to strengthen and lift our common project.

We have an open road to improve our short-medium-long term planning working in an effective way, volunteers and staff side by side, taking time to reflect together and to act but also to constantly evaluate and review our work. The new strategy obligates us to redesign our technical structure with a new job description for many of our posts across Europe, starting with a better optimization of the cost, time and impact of the work of your Secretary General. I am ready for that.

Our open road leads us to a sensible and continuous approach to the different social, religious and cultural realities across Europe. Taking into consideration the history behind the development of the YMCA on each context, YMCA Europe is here to be a reference that helps creating a unified voice on behalf of 2 million people, most of them young.

All of us – young movements and the ones with a longer history – are part of this unique mosaic. We seek for interaction among movements, sharing mutual development stories and achievements, learning from each other and benefiting from a huge accumulated knowledge. We must be eager to facilitate this mutual support and solidarity when we see movements with identity, financial or governance challenges. When one part of our body suffers, the whole body is ill.

We have an open road to strengthen the role of the National General Secretaries as a working platform within YMCA Europe, increasing your role in coordination with YMCA Europe staff. The use of new technologies to facilitate communication among the executive staff in Europe, the

identification of ways to cover our needs by specific training on topics such as management, social work, resource mobilization, marketing or international cooperation.

We have an open road to increase our role as a Christian centred, youth focused organization with an ecumenical vocation; taking every opportunity to promote interfaith dialogue and being inclusive through our work.

The way we relate and interact with others and our ability to transmit the message of Jesus Christ through our daily life-style and work, makes each of us the best witness of His Word. The multiplying effect of the example of an active and coherent Christian has often more impact than the best marketing campaign. Just imagine the impact of 2 million people across Europe thinking and acting this way every day.

Because of that, we have an open door to identify relevant programmes able to transform negative realities in contemporary times. We know that the resources are limited and we compete with many other organizations. But there are only two ways of making a difference when we compare with others :

Our capacity to change lives and to increase the quality of our initiatives.

Society is demanding and we, as YMCA, must also be demanding with ourselves. Working against discrimination and being an inclusive organization today, means high professionalism, specialization, measuring impact and communicating sincerely and effectively.

We have an open door to plan and develop a fantastic festival in 2013. Paying a special attention to the budget, programme and promotion, we must be able to gather thousands of people who “love 2 live” with enthusiasm an unforgettable experience with a multiplying effect in their local YMCAs and communities.

The road for a more effective and coordinated cooperation with the World Alliance of YMCAs is opened. We see alignment in our strategies and we have active Europeans from different contexts and ages representing us at the WAY Executive Committee. Our European diversity and capacity to

integrate and grow is an inspiration for our global movement also seeking now for new ways of being more relevant and solid. These are exciting times for the world movement and Europe has a crucial role based on our history and achievements.

We want to continue walking along the road with our partners. We are thankful for their trust, commitment and support. As we continue consolidating our cooperation, defining common goals and mutual expectations, we want to continue adding friends that understand international cooperation as a mutual learning and growth.

We are proud of having in our road all our field, partner, programme groups and areas of work with an incredible and constant participation of persons supported by national movements. And we want to keep you in our road providing your vision, time and support. This structure together with a better optimization of our Training Centre in Litomyšl based on imaginative and effective new formulas, provides an outstanding ground for our future growth.

But above all this, our road is open for young people. Young people were our funders in 1844. Young people wrote the Paris Basis in 1855. These two crucial historic moments happened in Europe under the leadership of young people.

Many of us gathered in the room started our commitment with the YMCA when we were quite young and all of us keep in our hearts – despite of our age – that special young spirit so visible at all levels in the YMCA. We are proud of the way that YMCA Europe has involved young people throughout almost four decades. Let us continue listening to them with great attention, providing the ground for their full development and further participation. Most of us with responsibilities in management and direction of the YMCA are now older adults and we still have the responsibility of considering our young people not the future but already the present of our movement.

This is exactly what was written in the 100 anniversary of the funding of the World Alliance of YMCAs :

“There is one central unalterable fact – it is our firm foundation. That fact is the capacity in every generation of youth whose heart God has touched, not only to dream great dreams but to translate those dreams into action. For this we thank God for the past; on this we stand with confidence for the future”.

Dear friends, I am aware of my role walking with you along this open road. I will never forget where we come from and why we are here as YMCA Europe. Remembering that will always be my inspiration in moments of questions without answers or when we face challenges. I have not said yet that the road is an easy one, without traffic, bumps or curves. But it is still an open road with excellent opportunities for all, wherever we are across Europe.

Be sure that this Secretary General is enthusiastic and confident about what we can achieve together. I will always serve putting the interests of YMCA Europe ahead of my own interests... I do not expect this to be a comfortable job but I feel privileged to be able to work with you...

With deep loyalty to our President and Executive Committee, working side by side with them. With a clear understanding of our mutual roles as volunteers and as staff, creating spaces for deliberation and following their mandates and also the decisions taken at our General Assemblies...

With great respect towards each of our member, cooperative movements and partners represented by all of you and by all those who are also part of our fellowship and are not here today.

It is already an exciting and inspiring journey and I ask you to join me in thanking God for leading the way.

Thank you.

*Juan Simoes Iglesias
May 2011*