

"GIVING YOUR NEIGHBOUR A FACE"
VISIONS - COURAGE - FAITH AND LOVE

EUROPEAN SECRETARY'S REPORT 1991/92

to the

EAY GENERAL ASSEMBLY, MAY 1992

(By Dölf Weder

1. A Summer Morning In The Mountains - Visions

Dear Friends

I love these fresh summer mornings up in the mountains.

You step out of your house into the bright sunshine. The sun bathes the whole of nature in gold. A delicate blue sky gently touches the mountains and forests. You smell the fresh green grass, on which the precious pearls of the dew-fall are still sparkling. In the distance you see the glittering waters of a waterfall diving into a cool mountain lake. You hear joyful birds singing the praise of the fresh morning. And you look up to the majesty of the mountains in front of you, up to the snowy mountain-top you have chosen to climb this day. With you and around you is a group of YMCA friends, making you feel the warmth of friendship and humanity. On your skin you feel a soft and gentle breeze of wind, reminding you of God's breath that keeps alive the whole creation.

Friends, it is on such a morning that we understand the wonder of God's creation, that we experience a glint of universal harmony, a divine gleam of the peace in God's Kingdom. It is on such a morning that we decide to strive for the integrity of creation, and to fight against the destructive powers of environmental devastation.

And it is on such a morning that we re-affirm our dedication to love and harmony, to global justice and peace for the whole humankind. Because on such a morning we feel close to God's good intention; we understand what he had in mind when he invented this wonderful world, when he created us as brothers and sisters, and when he brought us eternal love in the life of Jesus Christ, we feel new courage growing in our hearts.

The vision of a world of justice, peace and integrity of creation is created where people experience at least a gleam, at least a sign of the world as God has meant it to be.

The vision of a world of justice, peace and integrity of creation is nourished where people experience at least a bit of love, harmony and meaning of life.

You cannot give people a living vision of the Kingdom of God by only listing all the many negative aspects of our world: the injustice and exploitation, the hunger and poverty, conflicts and armed fights, the destruction of nature and dehumanisation of humankind.

Visions are nourished by experience - although leading far beyond experience.

And truly human visions are born out of love. It is love that produces the great human visions. And it is love that gives them their power.

The YMCA as a youth movement has committed itself to young people. Young people have a special need for a life vision. "Who am I?", they ask "Do I have a value? Am I lovable?" "What can I expect from life? What is my future?" "What is really important in life? What should I use my energy for?" "Whom shall I give my trust and love?"

Many young people have high ideals and goals.

And many young people are disillusioned. "Nobody really needs me." "I am only a small number among millions of other small numbers, I do not make a difference." "I am accepted if I fulfil the expectations of others, nicely and quietly." "I do not have influence on the big and problematic developments on our earth, let me care for myself only." "I belong to a disadvantaged group of young people, I will never have the chances that other young people have." "Nobody loves me, nobody cares about me, life is nothing but a fight."

Can the YMCA help these young people to develop their life vision? Both of them, the optimistic ones with their high ideals and goals, and the pessimistic ones with their lack of hope and perspectives? Can we offer young people a life vision that is full of life, full of meaning and sense, full of love and human solidarity, full of hope and courage, full of faith?

Such a vision can only be a global vision; the most vital issues of today are global issues.

It must be a life vision that is not a soap-bubble illusion, or an unproven assertion only. It must be a life vision that has something to do with the real world, with the youngs' everyday world; with the marvellous and exciting sides of this world, and with the so problematic and dark sides of this our earth. Such a life vision cannot only be a verbal thing, cannot only consist of theological talking or philanthropic idealism. At least glints, at least hints, at least some practical signs of this vision must be experienceable.

Young people who join the YMCA must have the chance to experience such life in its richness and fullness - at least in signs and beginnings. Just attending some kind of youth programme is not enough by a long way.

And that's the critical question: Have the European YMCAs given such life visions to young people during the past year? Has the EAY given such life visions to young people during the past year? Could young people experience in the YMCA at least some glints, at least some hints of the world as God has meant it to be? And has the YMCA helped these young people that at least some parts of these visions have become reality?

I know this is a difficult and touchy question; but also an essential one. It goes far beyond looking at some statistics only and being proud of big attendance in programmes. Keep this question in mind when listening to the various reports during this General Assembly and when discussing future plans for the EAY.

We are used to talking about the YMCA's mission. But true mission always comes out of a vision.

A vision is something holistic; it is a kind of picture; it is a basic conviction; it is a whole: In contrast to mission, it cannot be put into a "vision statement".

Vision precedes mission, but vision leads to mission - if it is a true, mountain moving vision.

The other way round: Mission without preceding vision is dead and sterile; it's a demand without motivation. We can produce as many mission statements as we want. If there are no visions behind them, they aren't of any practical value.

Our Bible is full of visions; just think of the prophets, of Moses, of Paul and of Jesus himself. All great things in the Bible have started with a vision, and they always have led to a mission.

Visions give the courage, give the Holy Spirit's power to carry out the related mission.

Do the European YMCAs, does the EAY still have visions?

And, Friends, what is your vision of the YMCA? When you are alone tonight, after the day's business, try to imagine your personal vision, have a look at your vision pictures with your inner eyes. Have a look at them from all sides. Be encouraged. - And then: move in love and faith!

2. We Are A Youth Movement

Friends, I said some minutes ago: "The YMCA as a youth movement has committed itself to young people." I do not expect that many of you disagree. But, honestly, is that true? Are we still a youth movement?

Is the fact that we fight here in the European Alliance - and also in the World Alliance - for significant higher participation of young people in decision making bodies and programme groups only a symptom that the YMCA has ceased to be a youth movement?

Personally, I am often surprised, and even shocked, to what extent some YMCAs have become established institutions, - with all the negative aspects of immobility and lack of innovation.

Last year, one of our National Movements in crisis carried out a highly interesting self-analysis. And in this study, they state clearly that the reason for their problems is that they have developed from a youth movement into a professional organisation offering services to the youth. The professional quality of many of these services is excellent. But there is no more membership basis, and certainly not a basis of young members and leaders. The YMCA is drying out.

There is a difference between "members" who are called "members" because they make use of certain programmes or services and members who are fully committed to the YMCA and help to shape it.

This National Movement formulated a clear strategy for recovering: They want to move from an organisation for the youth to an association that is with the youth and finally becomes a movement of the youth.

In a discussion I had last year with a local General Secretary in another country, I was told that his YMCA was no longer a YMCA for the youth, but a YMCA for the whole family; that it was no longer an organisation for men only, but also for women; that it was no longer a Christian association, but an association based on human values; and that, in reality, it was no longer an association, but a kind of professionally managed business which should pay with the profit of one sector "the good things" they wanted to do for the disadvantaged youth in another sector.

The YMCA, the "Young Men's Christian Association" - No more "young", no more "men", no more "Christian", no more "association"?

In my language, we call this "Etiketten-Schwindel", literally translated: "label-cheating". The word means that you put a label "red wine" on a bottle of strawberry syrup.

I don't have anything against strawberry syrup. In fact, I like strawberry syrup and wine. But when I have bought a bottle of wine, then I do not want to find strawberry syrup in it...

I will never forget the face of one of our European youth delegates at the Assembly of the World Alliance in Seoul. He was really pale and shocked when he told me that some people were discussing in all seriousness the need for a youth movement within the YMCA. "To talk about a 'youth movement' in a youth movement, isn't that totally crazy and against all logic and honesty?", he asked me.

I started a long explanation: "You have to understand that...".

I certainly do not fight here against having also programmes for older members and electing some of them into YMCA boards, I seriously think we should do it; even more: we need those older, committed, experienced members, we need the partnership of the generations! And I'm not at all against women in YMCA activities and YMCA boards.

But what is clear to me is that the YMCA has to concentrate with all its power on young people; that the YMCA has to be a place of freedom in which young people can develop. That is our speciality, strength and expertise. That distinguishes us from other organisations and agencies. That is one of the most essential parts of our identity and mission.

And what is also clear to me is that we have to remain a youth movement, and must not become a youth service organisation.

Looking at today's world, it is sad to observe that in many countries, other, more inspiring and "younger" movements have taken over the role the YMCA used to play in earlier years.

In 1855 in Paris, the average age of the 99 "fathers" and founders of the World Alliance was only 23 years! When these young men in that time were able to have such great visions and put them also into practice, - why should our young people today not be able to achieve extraordinary things?

I sometimes have the feeling that we are in danger of losing exactly these active, visionary young men and women; because we are not able to give them enough freedom and opportunities to dream their visions and put them into practice.

I want to encourage all National Movements to carefully answer the question whether and to what extent they still are a youth movement and what they can do to strengthen this important aspect.

Simply ask yourself how many of your young people in local YMCAs are only consumers of programmes and services that others create for them, and how many are actively involved in together shaping and creating these programmes. And then do the same for your activities on national level... And finally for our European level...

It is very encouraging to see that we get today in Central and Eastern Europe young, dynamic movements. Movements that are shaped by the visions and aspirations of young people. It may well be that our sisters and brothers in the East will soon challenge the YMCAs in the West and ask them whether they are still a youth movement!

In our new EAY Strategy, it is clearly stated that we want to be and remain a youth movement, and that we want to involve young people on all levels; it is also stated that all we are doing finally has to be relevant for young people on local level.

Friends, the EAY is committed to the European Alliance of a youth movement. We want to have young people in all our activities. Not only as participants in events that are well designed and professionally prepared by "old foxes". No, we want them involved in all aspects.

And we are optimistic.

For example in the programme field it seems that we are finally overcoming a certain stagnation. The programme groups develop new, more relevant ideas.

We need them to approach such vital issues as nationalism, world development, migration, homeless youth - to mention but a few.

Exciting new concepts are being tried out: "YMCA Games" 1992 and the planned "European Ten Sing Festival" 1993 are only examples of a new creativity.

The newly structured EAY Programme Field will give us additional flexibility to create new, relevant, young and dynamic ideas, groups and networks. I am deeply convinced that so many relevant, exciting, innovative ideas do exist in our National Movements; ideas and concepts that have to be shared throughout Europe. Many lively and creative young people wait only for the opportunity to show up on the European stage and to share their concerns, visions, gifts and talents.

The EAY will have the structure and the will to enable this to happen. But we can only do it if you identify and send us your most promising young people.

Among the young people of today, will be the world's key-leaders at the end of this and at the beginning of the next century. Let's invest in these young people!

3. Getting to Know Your Neighbour's Face

I would like to share with you now some thoughts about certainly the highest EAY priority during the past three years: IMC, Intermovement Cooperation.

We are dreaming of lively YMCA work in all the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. And, in fact: What is happening goes far beyond our expectations and even beyond the expectations of our friends in the East.

Again, things are carried forward by visions: The visions of some former and older YMCA members. But also the visions of hundreds of young people, who do not sit in apathy and wait until the problems in their countries are solved.

Of course, there are immense difficulties.

But today we have - with the exception of Lithuania, Albania and the former Yugoslavian states - YMCA movements and groups in all countries of east-central Europe. And even with groups in the CIS-States contacts do exist.

I was surprised myself when I counted our National Movements who have been active in IMC during the past three years: With the exception of only three, all of our EAY members have been involved in one way or the other! Isn't that great?!

Additional strong cooperation comes from the YMCAs of the USA and of Canada. And at the March Saphir Programme Institute even workshop leaders from all over the world shared their experience with us.

Friends, this is simply great! And it shows that the YMCA is still able to launch a major international effort which combines the strengths of almost all of our movements. Let us express our sincere thanks to all those who are involved in this great international cooperation!

An important element in this is certainly our IMC Field Group system. When created, it was a new concept and full of risks. But it proves to be an extremely valuable instrument in giving all National Movements the chance to be closely involved, to have ownership and to be a full partner in the IMC process.

The Field Group philosophy encourages bilateral partnerships and makes use of their motivational power; but it is based on multi-lateral cooperation, and it therefore effectively reduces the danger of dependencies from one single partner as well as the danger of one-sided influence.

The "Saphir-" and "5+2 Initiatives" have given us additional strong instruments in meeting the historical challenges.

All these developments have an enormously stimulating effect on the whole European Alliance, and very much strengthen our European cooperation in general.

Of course, a great deal of things still have to be achieved. They demand that we increase our cooperation and support. Sometimes I have the feeling the excitement in the West about the developments in the East has already past, and the West may soon turn back to "business as usual". There is a big danger that the political Iron Curtain could be replaced by an economical and social curtain between East and West. We are challenged to intensify our efforts, and certainly not to reduce them!

And don't forget: The whole IMC process is an excellent example for a cooperation that goes far beyond a one-way "help"-operation. It is an excellent example for the enormous benefits of mutual sharing and caring - on both sides!

But - some people may ask - what about Southern Europe?

Southern Europe is presently finding a new role in the EAY.

This is particularly true for Greece. I have never seen Greece so internationally active as during the past two years. Without Greece, the Bulgarian YMCA would not be what it is today. And also in Cyprus we witness - due to Greek initiatives - the establishment of a new YMCA. Registration of a YMCA Cyprus is to be expected during the next weeks. We rejoice and congratulate!

Spain received up to a few years ago strong support from the outside, And now it discovers its own strength, and realises that it has to share many ways of doing things and a lot of working models which can be applied also in a number of other countries.

And even the small island of Malta eagerly contributes to our European YMCA family. Its YMCA President has stated it again and again: "We do not want to receive only, we can also offer many things!" Isn't that a true YMCA attitude?!

My encouragement to all of you, therefore, is simple: Do not sit in isolation in a corner, trying to do everything alone or waiting for a miracle. Continue to be involved in international cooperation. Strengthen your ties with our other movements. Give and you will receive! Share and it will be shared with you! Strengthen and you will be strengthened!

A final aspect of IMC is less positive.

We have not yet achieved one important thing: We have not yet been able to pass our vision on to our regional and local YMCAs.

The involvement of our Movements still remains very much on national level. We look for funds from governments and churches, but we do not sufficiently involve our local associations.

And this although many of them are eager to get involved. European staff and officers are often asked, sometimes even challenged, why National offices block information and initiatives; why National offices withhold this European process from their local associations. Difficult to answer...

The result is that quite a number of local individuals support non-YMCA initiatives in Central and Eastern Europe. We know of a 20 year old girl, local YMCA leader, who organised a public campaign and brought two trucks full of goods down to Romania; - her YMCA, meanwhile, was busy with itself...

The lesson we from the EAY have to learn is that we have to improve communication from our side. We have to produce more information and promotional material which can be used directly down on local level and which is attractive for young people, - the present publications aren't there yet.

"Who is my neighbour?", Jesus was asked. Jesus' answer was the parable of the good Samaritan: "Open your eyes, look around you, and you will see your neighbour; and then act!" The theme of our General Assembly is "Giving your neighbour a face". Your neighbour has a face. Your neighbour is not an abstract theological phantom. Your neighbour is sitting beside you, here in this room.

Tomorrow during our two case studies we want to give you examples of how local young YMCA people got to know the faces of their neighbours. We will hear that this experience has considerably shaped their lives, has given them new visions and life perspectives, has helped them to establish deep friendship and solidarity across the borders of nations and cultures.

New plans in the field of Youth and Programme Exchange will help the EAY to facilitate more of these type of experiences. Intensive Leadership Development activities will be closely linked.

We expect already for 1992/93 around 20 to 30 international one-year volunteers to serve somewhere in Europe, and a number of professionals to be placed in other countries for study periods.

Friends, this is my message to this General Assembly: Get your young local people involved in this great process of international sharing and caring! Allow them to experience themselves what it means to have friends, what it means to have brothers and sisters in other countries and especially, what it means to assume responsibility for each other.

Such experience will become part of their life vision. They will experience that they can make a difference. That they are important for other people. That they have something to share. That they can love. And that they are loved.

We do not talk here about finance campaigns, touristic encounters or one-off actions only. We are talking about a process in which young people discover the faces of their sisters and brothers in other countries, in which they assume responsibility for each other, through which they enter into a relationship of mutual sharing and caring.

This experience within Europe will help them to develop the understanding that they are part of a world, a world that is much more than Europe. But here in Europe they can learn what it means to share with those who have less in one respect; but have so much to give in many other respects. Here in Europe they can learn what it means to assume responsibility for each other. This will encourage them to assume responsibility also for the people in all the other parts of the world.

This our earth so desperately needs people who live this mutual sharing and caring, who assume responsibility for each other! This our earth so desperately

needs people who tackle this world's most burning problems with vision, courage, faith and love. It's the only way our world can survive.

I have seen the eyes of our three local YMCA members when they came back from Hungary and Czechoslovakia, where they had delivered office equipment, and keyboards and drum sets for new Ten Sing groups. I have seen their enthusiasm when they were talking about the friendship they had experienced with the young leaders of the local Debrecen YMCA. These are the kind of things the YMCA can do for young people - even for young people from such affluent countries like Switzerland!

Friends, we have to tear down all our institutional barriers, barriers that prevent us from enabling our young people to make this enormous experience of God's universal love!

4. Visions - Courage - Faith and Love

Many more things could be said about our world situation, about the situation in Europe and about the European YMCAs. We could mention that the European Alliance has to think over its role vis à vis the World Alliance. We could mention that Europe also as an Area organisation wants to intensify its contacts with the other Areas, because we are convinced that we can learn so much from their experiences and perspectives, and that we all together have to share and care for a better and more just world. Many more challenges could be passed on. But the time is limited, and a lot of things will be mentioned in the different reports, discussions and workshops during this General Assembly

Let me close with some few words of thanks:

I want to thank all of you for your valuable cooperation and support during the past year. I want to thank the members of the EAY Executive Committee and of all the other EAY Groups who have been working so hard to make this EAY a lively, relevant body. I want to thank all the EAY staff for their excellent and highly professional work.

But above all I want to thank our Lord and Saviour who always holds His hands over us and who continues to use the European YMCAs as His tool to give hundred and thousands of young people in Europe vision and ground for their lives.

I have given this report the title: "Giving Your Neighbour a Face Visions - Courage - Faith and Love"

May you all be inspired by God's visions, may you all be empowered by the courage of the Holy Spirit, may you all be carried by strong faith in Jesus Christ, and may you all be moved by God's love to the young people in Europe and in the whole world!

Thank you.