

**Secretary General's report to the European Alliance of YMCAs
General Assembly,
Faro, Portugal, May 25, 2006**

Matthew 5, 41"If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles."

Dear friends,

I have seen God playing with light and colours all over the sky. I was almost 19 years old and for one year I was a schoolteacher on a small island very close to the North Cape in the far north of my country. The sun left us early in the autumn and there was darkness day and night. The northern light is very strong up there and sometimes I just had to lie on my back to be able to see the whole sky from horizon to horizon and experience how fantastic formations of light were building up and flashing over the sky with lightening speed in fabulous colours.

It was a powerful experience.

Eight weeks ago I was in Ivanovo. Some of the roads in Russia are like the roads from my childhood, not so well kept, and after rain, water is everywhere in small ponds, excellent to play with. And since YMCA is for children and young people, I decided to play with the ponds. It was evening and dark, and I was able to see one star reflecting its light in the pond, and I realised that through this thin ray of light, heaven and earth were connected. It is enough to put your foot into the pond, and the connection is destroyed. Of course you do not have to do that; instead you can study the one little star in the pond, but be aware how vulnerable it is!

We are going to decide on a new five years strategy in a few moments. We have written it together and I like it very much and I wanted to use this occasion to look for inspiration and motivation, I wanted to see God playing his light organ all over the sky and move us. It is difficult to plan with God, I have the feeling that he prefers to plan with us. So - instead of the light organ it will be tiny small stars in the pond.

1 EIGHT STARS TO TELL WHAT HAPPENED IN EAY LAST YEAR

Will you walk with me from pond to pond? This is not the first mile, it is the second mile, the extra mile, the crazy mile, the mile you are not forced to go, you choose it yourself. Therefore this extra mile has the power to change you, maybe. Change us, maybe, as an organisation for children and youth.

About this time, the disciples came to Jesus and asked him who would be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus called a child over and had the child stand near him. Then he said:

“I promise you this. If you don’t change and become like this child, you will never get into the kingdom of heaven. But if you are as humble as this child, you are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And when you welcome one of these children because of me, you welcome me. (Matthew 18, 1-5.)

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Remembering those words of Jesus, I realised that I had just met him in a house in Ivanovo, he was 12 years old and very small for his age, but he was fantastic in demonstrating his skills in kickboxing. He came from a difficult home with alcoholic parents and was a street kid in Ivanovo and I met him in the house run by Alexei and his YMCA. We celebrated the 7th birthday of the YMCA programme for street kids that same day I was playing with the ponds. Can we all say hello to Alexei from Ivanovo, because Alexei has Jesus in his local YMCA!

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As I stood there staring down at the pond I saw the star being reflected in the water and it was constantly changing. I saw many faces, A few months before I had met Jesus in the north of Albania, in a city called Skodra. He was a little girl of the Roma society and lived in the poorest conditions possible. I met her in the school run by Skodra YMCA and I gave Jesus a

YMCA pin, that was all I had, and I felt ashamed, but I think she liked it. She smiled beautifully in the middle of the star in the pond. We had Board meetings and FG-meetings, fundraising activities and we worked out a new Strategy plan. Last year and we balanced the

budgets and we will finalise a multimillion dollar Training Centre. But these two children are the highlights of the annual report of EAY.

When I was in Jerusalem 4 years ago and visited the grave, Jesus was not there. He is still out there somewhere, busy, putting himself behind every single child and teenager in this world, so that when we receive them in the YMCA, we receive Jesus. The empty grave is our symbol. The empty grave is a powerful message. It tells us why we are running YMCAs. We are running YMCAs for all those children and young people Jesus is finding out there and he needs somewhere to send them. We need to walk the second mile to reach all of them.

The empty grave - the friends of Jesus in despair and the Bible tells us that they did not understand anything - so much like us.

You have to become like children to understand, said Jesus. And this is how some children understand eternal things, the Gospel according to John, 6 years, Nicole 5 and Carl-Fredrik 6.

The soul resembles a plastic bag. It is thin and transparent and holds around 4 litres.

It is God who owns the sun. He turns it off at night to save electricity.

Jesus died on Good Friday. Then he came back from death three days after. He was dirty and full of mud, but in excellent mood.

Jesus flew up to heaven and there he met Jesus. Now he is sitting on the right side of himself. That is completely impossible to understand and nothing to worry about.

The best thing with God is that he likes children who are not nice. He is the only one who likes children who are not nice.

I jumped to the next pond.

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Again the stars were human faces. For a moment I saw a young girl from Norway, her face was in a Norwegian newspaper, and all over two pages were her words: "FOR ME THIS FESTIVAL IS

SHINING!” She had been to the Prague festival in August 2003 and her life had been given shining light. A teenager with her heart open in a beautiful smile because of a YMCA-event. The star in the pond told me that we have set up all the planning tools and mechanisms for the next Prague Festival, August 3-9, 2008. Ian Green from England is the chair of the Steering Committee.

We have organised close to Euro 50 000 in guarantees, but we also have another 45 000 promised so we count with 95 000 today. We need at least 65 000 more from you, and we are both hopeful and optimistic. Because this next Festival shall be as shining as the last one and shall change young peoples’ lives and National Movements strength and Mission Awareness. And remember who is behind those thousands of teenagers that we will receive in Prague.

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The clouds were moving fast over the stormy sky, and at times the ponds were dark with no stars. Then I saw another one, it was moving pictures, a film, a terrible film from Ukraine. Close ups of young people dying from HIV/AIDS, showing the gruesome pain of the suffering patients. Around the film I saw a silent group of young YMCA-leaders from around Europe. It was the workshop on HIV/AIDS that we organised last autumn in the Training Centre in Litomyšl, supported by Council of Europe. I see tears in the eyes of grown people, but I also see the determination to stay engaged, I see pride in their eyes that the YMCA is engaging fully in the sufferings of young people, engaging to defend young people from the terrible pandemic.

This is a double star, because it is the star of the Global Operating Plan, GOP, as well as the star of the EAY Training Centre in Litomyšl. In the pond I see schoolchildren in classrooms all over Belarus, Ukraine and Russia, and I see teenagers from the local YMCA, trained to be Peer Educators, to share knowledge and information about HIV/AIDS and drugs abuse. I am proud of the GOP and the solid work against HIV/AIDS being done under the leadership of Sasha from Belarus, Viktor from Ukraine and Nikolai from Russia, will you please stand for a moment?

The Training Centre got 1 million Euros from EU last year and in these days it is finished with 1500 m2 of training facilities and 65 beds and our own YMCA Europe ecumenical chapel.

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Surprise, surprise! I see the Pope in the pond, his beautiful white hair and smiling face. And I am so close to him, what has happened to me? I really want to go to heaven, but not overly soon, not this soon. Dear Lord. But I can calm down. This star shows the Pope giving his blessing for the preparatory meeting for the third European Ecumenical Assembly to be organised in September 2007 in Romania, Sibiu. EAY is back on the ecumenical stage, actively participating as an associated member of CEC, Conference of European Churches. When I was in Rome for this meeting and introduced the YMCA, I got so many warm words of welcome from church leaders having missed the YMCA. We have a glorious history from the ecumenical work of the past generations. It is time that we are back!

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A few weeks ago I was giving a speech at a meeting of retired YMCA angels and their angel wives in the state of Missouri, USA. A fantastic evening. The mission awareness I could hear in the voices of these retirees, inspiring! In October Peter and I went to Montreal, Canada to participate in the International Conference of the YMCAs of Mexico, USA and Canada. It demonstrates the growing strength in our relations with North America. Canada has their own Assembly these days, so we have no representatives from there. But we do have Deale and Selma from the USA and we do have Fernando from the Mexican YMCA and from the LACA – please stand for a moment!

Back to the state of Missouri. It is called the “show me-state”. They do not take your word for it; they ask you to show them. Action speaks louder than words. And I got this cute little story there:

Church gossip.

Mildred, the church gossip and self-appointed monitor of the church’s morals, kept sticking her nose into other people’s business. Several members of the church did not approve of her extra curricular activities, but feared her enough to maintain their silence. She made a mistake, however, when she accused Henry, a new member, of being

an alcoholic after she saw his old pickup parked in front of the town's only bar one afternoon. She emphatically told Henry and several others that everyone seeing it there would know what he was doing. Henry, a man of few words, stared at her for a moment and just turned and walked away. He didn't explain, defend or deny. He said nothing. Later that evening, Henry quietly parked his pickup in front of Mildred's house....walked home....and left it there all night.

You gotta love Henry....!

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In the pond I see a new star; it is a strange memory of a breakfast, not at Tiffany's, but in Geneva, quite a number of years ago. I was introduced to a female colleague from somewhere, blessed be her not mentioned name or country. And she said, So, you are Johan, I have heard so much about you! Oh, nice! –You are the one not caring about the poor of the world! We had an interesting breakfast together.

Stars in this pond reflecting bad memories disappear quickly, and now I saw other faces in the pond. Now the star was reflecting a big wish for the EAY, it was a key element of the present Strategy, namely to include the international YMCA agencies, the world services, in the meetings of EAY. Not to control, not to decide, but to integrate the world wide, global dimension. We do not want to be isolated from the rest of the world, and we never were. European YMCAs are everywhere in the rest of the world doing fine things. We want to participate in the GOP for the rest of the world; we want to stay wide open for the global dimensions of our world. The theme of the next Festival in Prague will be “Real Life” and we warmly welcome the offer from Y-Care International to work closely with us to introduce Global Youth Work at the Festival.

The star is changing a bit. In the pond I see the terrible, terrible images of dying children, children dying from diseases they did not need to die from. Now I see the face of professor Jeffrey Sachs, talking to the YMCAs at the meeting in Montreal about the end of poverty and how we can make it happen in our lifetime. In the pond I see the faces of Chris and Berthold, Werner and Eilert, Nickolai and Selma and Andreas. Their meeting of the World Services is now integrated in our meeting and we can see the big perspectives together! They are joined

by Bart and Emile from the WAY. Please get up all of you and feel very welcome in our midst – your presence here is important to us.

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The latest star I see in the pond is called YES, Young Peoples' European Spectrum. It started at the World Council in Mexico when a group of young people from England contacted me about a young people's forum in EAY. I strongly supported the initiative, and now they met before this Assembly and have become more multinational, but they need more people from more countries. Can we see you, please?

Before we listen to a piece of music, I want to say thank you to the EAY Executive Committee who planned for these stars to happen, please give them a warm hand! And then to say thank you to the staff of the EAY, who organised things so well that these eight stars came to us – please give them a warm hand as well!

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2 THE SECOND MILE OF EAY IN EIGHT STEPS

The stars in the pond are reflection of heaven, shining light out of heaven. When you see a star like that in the pond in your local park an evening in the fall; that is a moment of eternity.

In the YMCA we are working with heavenly things. We are working with things of shining light, light emanating from and returning to eternity, light connecting heaven and earth.

We shall walk the second mile; together we shall walk the second mile. It takes energy, stamina, endurance, dedication and deep going motivation.

Yes, we become tired, I know. We can sit at the river of Babylon like the people of Abraham in the Old Testament and let our tears fill the river while we are complaining and focusing on our own misery.

In this world where there is so much darkness, there is enough reason to loose courage. When you see the hungry, sickness stricken children

of Africa and the millions of people dying from war and violence, there is reason to loose hope.

But we are not loosing courage, we are not loosing hope. We are not sitting at the river of Babylon with our eyes full of tears and hearts filled with self-pity.

We will decide together in a few minutes, I hope, to walk the second mile, and if it takes the next five years, we will walk till 2011 to reach the end of the second mile.

Dear friends, what does it mean, this metaphor, to walk the second mile?

For me the first mile is the grey one, is what can be expected from us, is what we offer. Business as usual, nothing extra. The second mile is the mile of change. Is the risky one, because we may not feel so safe, so secure, and so comfortable? The second mile demands from us sacrifice and investment, investment of quite important things.

To walk the second mile means to leave your personal and organisational comfort zone. Who wants to do that? Who wants to sacrifice their own feeling of comfort and strength? Before we can answer that question, we need to find out what this second mile will look like! This will be the EAY second mile in 8 steps:

1. The new strategy says that we shall start this second mile by going deep to the roots of our spirituality and encourage one another to receive the words of freedom and forgiveness from the risen Lord, receive with joy the music coming from the empty grave. Together we shall understand again and again that the word of the risen Lord is a marching order. It is not a key to close the door against the struggling world. It is an order to walk the second mile! All the ponds are out there, not indoors.

A Christian organisation isolating itself and focusing only on its own culture and needs will immediately experience to be as empty as the empty grave. It may be as Christian as it wants to be – Jesus is not there. Because Jesus is out there where people struggle, loose, make

fools of themselves and live ordinary lives trying to survive and help their families. It has always been easier for those of us who have fallen on our faces a few times, to understand the grace of the Lord, than for those people who always lived in proper company. The grace of the Lord gives miracles in weak hands, stars in the ponds connecting heaven with earth – all happening in the YMCA.

And this second mile will also include Inter Faith Dialogue – to create an understanding with brothers and sisters from other Creeds.

2. The next step on this mile is to establish a new EAY Mentor-scheme. We have learnt this idea from the Global Operating Plan. We will train small teams of YMCA experts – you! Then three of you can go together to visit one National Movement and analyse together with those YMCA friends how the situation is with Mission Awareness, the Relevance of Programmes and the Sustainability of that YMCA. Why are you there? What do you want to do there? Can you afford it?

3. We belong to the same family in Europe; therefore we will bring the Programme work and the Movement Development work even closer together. This is also GOP-ideas. It is not only lack of money which decides who needs help. More focus on the Programmes, and therefore we need a European Programme Secretary.

4. We belong to the same family in this world. That is why we want the international agencies, the World Services to be closer to us, we want to develop Global Youth work and see the world in one perspective. So often we do something to our work when we put it in different categories. People should not be categorised. We all belong to one family. There is only one-second mile, but it goes from my doorstep to the end of the world. And no one is able to walk that long alone. Our engagement does not stop at the borders of Europe. The Festival in 2008 will be a fantastic demonstration of this fact. Real Life is one life, and we all belong to it. This is also a GOP-idea.

5. We hope that the Training Centre will be home to those visions and serve them as a resource centre. Use it!

6. Now I am back to my ponds again to look for stars. We need some real stars to help us to resource this great future of the YMCA. We all

know that wine and wisdom grow in quality and strength with age. Let me serve you the best wine and wisdom the EAY can offer: Terry, Egon, Jan, Bob and Dölf. The crème de la crème de l'EAY will ask you to walk the second mile with them and help them to establish a development fund for YMCA in Europe. Terry will explain how this is going to happen later, but Peter's reaction was: I will be the first to sign up for this. I said: Then I will be the second; if that place is not already taken. Will you join us in resourcing the great visions we are developing? And we are appealing to your personal pocket as well as to your local or National YMCA pockets.

7. The second fundraising initiative to help us create the future is that the Executive Committee has decided to ask for professional help in the development of a strategy for corporate sponsorship in Europe. His name is Harald Hjort. Please give him a warm hand and welcome him into the family of EAY. We see great perspectives together with Harald.

8. In the constitution we will continue to carry the honourable name The European Alliance of YMCAs, but on our paper and envelopes and for daily use the name is from now YMCA Europe and this will be our new logo. The Executive Committee has decided and Radek has organised the design with the help of professional companies in Prague. Thank you!

This was the second mile in 8 steps. Are you willing to share this extra mile with us?

What we decide to achieve together in the next strategic period for YMCA Europe, is to spend that second mile to search for more stars, to let more shining light into this world, to open doors, gates wide open for heavenly light to shine into the darkness of this world so that hope can grow. That is why the second mile is the Blue mile. The mile of miracles and beautiful surprises. God bless us and give us strength and wisdom and crazy energy to walk the entire second mile. And while you are walking the second mile, look for the ponds and look for the stars.

Thank you.