

SECRETARY GENERAL'S SPEECH TO THE YMCA EUROPE GENERAL ASSEMBLY
MAY 17 – 2007
KIEV, UKRAINE

Theme: **“In my Father’s house there are many rooms.”**

I. UNITY IN DIVERSITY

One of my first international YMCA experiences was to welcome a bus full of foreign YMCA friends and see that the first piece of luggage they downloaded was a case full of beer bottles. Pietistic Norwegians has a peculiar relationship to alcohol. If you tell them about Jesus making water into wine, they will tell you: “Yes, we know that it says so in the Bible, but we strongly dislike this miracle!”

Many years after that incident I was YMCA secretary and taking a group of 40 young YMCA leaders on a bus ride to Switzerland. We had a blessed experience and when we came back to the boarder between Sweden and Norway, an evil spirit gave me the idea of another practical joke. I got the bus driver on to the idea, and we went into the customs control and came back with sad faces. “Friends – this will take a long time. The Swedish customs controllers want to go through our entire luggage. The only way to avoid it is if we all run to our suitcases and take all alcohol and tobacco and then show it in the windows of the bus.” Nobody doubted the message, and few minutes later the YMCA bus slowly passed the customs controllers with a good choice of tax-free goods displayed in the windows. In the front window my good colleague sat with a bottle of cognac and said with red face: “It is for my uncle! It is for my uncle!”

Some of those people have not forgiven me to this date. But on that same travel, almost 25 years ago, we had visited YMCA friends in the south of Germany where you were supposed not to smoke, but welcome to drink wine. And then in the north you could smoke and drink beer.

Now I have visited YMCAs on all continents, around the globe, and really learnt to appreciate the cultural diversity in our movement. The African Lion dancers in Dakar, Senegal, were breathtaking in their powerful expression of speed and rhythm, as was their food with all its spices. Carnival in New Orleans, Samba on the beaches of Rio and horse riders in Mexico compete in my memories with small ballerinas in Singapore and the excellent cuisine of Hong Kong.

What has all of this to do with the theme, with theology? A lot.

I am a theologian, and the key term for me in theology was always INCARNATION. What it is, John explains to us in the New Testament, John chapter 1. 14:

“The Word became a human being and lived here with us. We saw his true glory, the glory of the only Son of the Father. From him all the kindness and all the truth of God have come down to us.”

The Son of God was a Jew from Palestine, born in the city of Bethlehem. He dressed like a Palestinian and helped saving a problem by making water into wine. If he had been born a

Norwegian on the west coast, he would have dressed like a fisherman and not lived under the hot Palestinian sun, but in the heavy rain from the Atlantic Ocean. Unlike the Scots who uses that Atlantic rain to make Whisky, on the west coast of Norway Jesus would have made water into coffee. That would hardly stand out as a miracle, since all of us make coffee from water every day, but the good thing would be that there would not be a wine miracle in the Bible.

I studied theology for seven years. That is a long time. It gave me some solid values and knowledge that still is an important part of me. 25 years after graduation, we students came together and I was taken by surprise how almost all of us looked back with a critical view to what we had experienced. We were not happy. What that university had tried to do to us, was to put us into a washing machine for six years to clean us from alternative solutions, the Orthodox were not so good, the Catholics had misunderstood, the Pope and everything, and all the other religions were really bad. After six years there should be a clean, but narrow message, thoroughly the Lutheran version of Truth. Then they put us into the tumble dryer for one year to make us forget about the juicy things of life, the physical realities, and the bodily needs. What came out of that process naturally was clean and dry and very, very boringly communicating from head to head. One of my first challenges after that was to go on a two weeks summer tour with a Ten Sing group of 100 juicy, noisy, physical and curious teenagers and I was supposed to preach the Gospel to them. Not much from the washing machine-tumble dryer theology could be used. It was like throwing yourself as a piece of raw meat to the lions. Of course I could not use the robe of a Priest, they would laugh. I could not use the thoughts of a Priest or the language of a Priest. I had to forget about most of the things I had been trained to do, and then I told them stories. That is universal. From the beginning of mankind, we shared stories, words which gave us roots and belonging. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word became a human being and lived here with us. And as I shared stories with the teenagers, it was like that happened again, the word became alive, and I met Jesus among those wild teenagers. Of course I did, because he always comes to ordinary people where they are, everywhere and in every different culture. It was just that the theological faculty had forgotten to tell us. Wow! Since then Incarnation has been a key term for me and still is. It has taught me a deep respect for all the things I do not understand, all the different cultures and churches and religions. In my fathers house there are many rooms!

And it is very similar with the YMCA. The vision of the YMCA, to serve people in body, mind and spirit, takes very different forms in different local communities and cultures. And still we share the same vision around the globe, and not many organisations can claim that. This diversity is a huge richness of the YMCA, we are different, and still one.

As there are many rooms in the house of the Lord, there are many, many rooms in the YMCA worldwide. Our problem is to show the world that we belong to one house. Our challenge is to come together under one symbol. Our chance is to wave the flags so that the world will understand what the YMCA is doing around the world. I am not saying that we should all do the same and look alike. No – the diversity is our richness. But we need to search for a formula, a declaration of our mission, so that the world outside us can easily understand what we are and support us worldwide.

In the world of business it is called branding. It takes time and hard work and it is like the farmer when he is sowing – it takes time before it grows and you can harvest. But we need to start that work now so that next generation will benefit from it.

In YMCA Europe we hired a professional fundraiser for a full year, Harald. He worked well and approached business companies in many countries in Europe and the learning is that those people of the business world know about Save the Children, Plan, Red Cross, Amnesty etc. but they do not know us well enough to offer support and to connect their names to us.

This image building, branding of the YMCA must go from National Movements over Area Organisations and straight to the World Alliance of YMCAs. Are you as National Movements motivated for this challenge? If so – where can we start and what can we do together? It will benefit you as much as it will benefit the umbrella organisations.

Those of you, who are here for the first time, may not experience this annual report like you expected. In the working documents you will find the records of what we did together last year, statistics, narratives, reports and action plans for the next year. We are proud of it, and we want to be happy about it, but still the thoughts I want to share with you here, is not so much to convince you that we were good last year, as it is to look for the right direction for the future. Constantly we have to ask ourselves if we are relevant and if we are close enough to the people we are to serve. It means Incarnation for me. I have tried to express this theological term by calling it Blue Music. This is much more beautiful and much more open-ended and I have experienced that it starts thought processes in many people and they make their own interpretations and that is the whole idea. My question is always where the Blue Music is taking us. Blue Music is creativity and fantasy, is thinking out of the box, is humour and smiles and laughter, is fantastic new ideas and people who dedicate themselves to implement them, is love and care and fresh motivation. Grey music is the 80 % hard work, good, needed, interesting and continuous administration and management. Of course we need to do that. But Blue Music is new visions and new challenges. We need both.

Now for a while some elements from the ordinary annual report:

1. The Blue Music is blowing through the preparation of the Festival in Prague next year. They talk about the Festival in Ecuador in South America and in Calgary and Ontario in Canada, In Buffalo and Chicago in the USA, in Africa and in the Middle East and in Asia. We have a very strong Steering Group leading a small army of programme volunteers from many countries together with a growing number of volunteers. The Blue Music is blowing through our YMCA Europe Programme Groups as they are shouldering the responsibility for the programme of the Festival together with the Steering Group. We are dealing with ministries of the Czech Government and the city authorities of Prague. We have got great financial support in the form of guarantees from a few National Movements and local YMCAs. We need some more, though. Can your National Movement trust us with a small guarantee with hopes that they will be returned? We are optimistically preparing for many thousands of participants from around the globe to face the theme of the Festival: Real Life.
2. The Blue Music is blowing through the Movement Development and all the Field Groups. We have a meeting this year where we further discuss how the Programme Groups shall work closer with the Movement Development.

We are making visible progress in many countries. An example from Caucasus: A grant for three years of 500 000 Euros given to us by ICCO, Netherlands, EED, Germany and HEX, Switzerland, all church development agencies, to help us develop YMCA in Georgia, our newest full member and Armenia and Nagorno Karabach.

Only very small money comes to our core budget, but it is paying for our staff Vardan's cost and is of course a blessing for those YMCAs and the development projects they are running for young people. Vardan, Gerhard, Cees and other people helped to organise this grant. I could have mentioned other examples from Russia, Balkan, central Europe. Still we need human resources and modest financial resources to create new Field Groups for new countries on the Balkan Peninsula. We need a Field Group for Kosovo, use the opportunity to meet Murat here, the leader of YMCA there, and listen to his stories about the Blue Bus of Kosovo. The first initiatives are coming from Serbia; we are waiting for Croatia, Montenegro and other countries. We are not ashamed to ask for your assistance.

3. The Blue Music is blowing through the YMCA Europe Training Centre in Litomyšl, Czech Republic. It was officially opened in September last year, a thousand people came to the ceremony. Talk to Jana Mackova here, the centre manager, and learn how beautiful it is, how cheap it is and how easy to travel to. Next year we are proud to invite all of you to the YMCA Europe General Assembly in our own centre. The total cost of the renovation was roughly 2 million Euros. The Czech Government and the city of Litomyšl gave 840 000 Euros, the EU gave 1 million Euros, Danish Y'sMen through Poul Thomsen's initiative gave 70 000 Euros and started the whole process back in 1996, and YMCA of the USA and Norway and Y'sMen International gave 30 000 Euros. What has been left to YMCA Europe to fundraise, is roughly 65 000 Euros. It is a low price to pay, but we need to pay it this year. We are inviting you to sponsor a chair for €100, a bed for €1000 and a small room for €3000 and a big one for €5000. Germany, Sweden, Netherlands, Spain and Canada have sponsored a room each. The rest of the nearly 40 000 has been donated by individuals and local YMCAs. If the rest of the National Movements would give us a small donation each, we would reach the last €25 000 needed this year. Please talk to Ed who will give you papers and take your pledges. Please help us – a shared burden is a possible burden to carry.

II. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

From the first day I took over as the Secretary of YMCA Europe I made it a high priority for us to have enough good, young people to represent us wherever we are invited to be.

I have personally great hopes and expectations to the YES-group in YMCA Europe. That stands for Young Peoples' European Spectrum.

The young people intend the YES group to be

- A group that the European Alliance of YMCAs can access whenever they are seeking the views of young people across Europe.
- A group that will communicate together through an internet network when we can't be together in person.

You will hear more about YES later on in this assembly, they need and they deserve our support, because they will help us to have the YMCA Europe well represented in the European structures.

This year the European Youth Forum facilitated a conference of young people to celebrate the fifty years of the Rome Treaty – the foundation of the EU.

In this text the most essential issues of our time are addressed, including the need for Sustainable Development Policies to be developed in Europe and it is called: The Rome Youth Declaration.

I am proud to support this text, and let me just quote from the last paragraph:

“Public authorities must recognise and use the potential of youth organisations and alternative types of participation, which function as schools for democracy and active citizenship. The Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) bridge the gap between where the policies are made and where they are implemented. Funding for NGOs is important in enabling them to work efficiently and to create spaces for dialogue which are accessible to young people.

Listen to what we have to say, ask us what we need and then act! “

A few weeks earlier there was another consultation of young people in Strasbourg focusing on the theme “Being a Young Refugee in Europe Today”, organised by the Council of Europe. Young refugees voiced their desperation and feeling of humiliation and being discriminated against. A strong appeal is coming to us about improving approaches and structures and ways refugees are being treated.

As YMCA we do not want to belong to a Fortress Europe, but to a humane Europe.

We are in the land of Chernobyl and we shall hear from the countries’ own experts the terrible consequences Ukraine and its neighbours had to face after the nuclear disaster back in 1986. We shall also hear from Chris Roles and Y-Care International about the huge challenges we are faced with around the globe.

Questions of environmental disasters and the disasters of poverty and injustice and xenophobia can not only be solved by you and me changing attitudes. We also need to join forces with people and organisations around us to make an impact. That is why the European Youth Forum is important for us.

We must start with ourselves. Imagine what impact it would have if all 45 million YMCA people around the world cried out loudly against this injustice and against the irresponsible environmental abuse today.

We shall start with the Festival in Prague next year and mobilise under the theme Real Life and we shall introduce the new programme: Global youth work.

Last year you may remember from my speech the gospel according to 5 and 6 years old children. You may remember that they told about Jesus who came back from death three days later, full of mud and dirt, but in excellent mood.

Since today is Independence Day of my country, I would like to quote more from the same children, but this time about the relationship between Sweden and Norway. These children come from both sides of the border, by the way. For those of you not totally updated on the history of our northern corner of the world, Norway and Sweden were in union together and divided from one another in 1905.

Tinius, 8 years: "In 1905 the countries were divided in two erogenous zones, so that we should become better friends."

Mathea, 7 years: "It is so cool that Norway and Sweden were divided. In this way it is no longer one big boring country, but two small boring countries."

Mikael, 8 years from Sweden: "At the end there was a war between Sweden and Norway. Luckily Sweden won, so that we could get rid of Norway."

Tage, 7 years from Sweden: "It is God who gave us Sweden, and it is God who did not want Norway."

Earlier today I mentioned that if Jesus were Scottish, he would have made Whisky from water, and on the west coast of Norway he would have made coffee from water. And furthermore, and now, Swedish friends, I decide to be humble, for a change, when I say that if, and I underline as strongly as I can, if Jesus were Swedish, he would have told the parable of the good Norwegian, something totally unexpected.

Bart will talk to us tomorrow about Inter Faith dialogue, and I am sure that he will use much more relevant examples than what I am doing just now, but the truth is that the parable, not of the good Norwegian, but of the good Samaritan, was the first example of Inter Faith Dialogue.

After the Assyrians conquered Israel in 722 before Christ, the Samaritans became a mixed population with a religion mixed with pagan elements and therefore not acceptable by the Jews. When the Israelis came back from the exile in Babylon, they had to fight with the Samaritans, and there was a deep hostility between the two groups not to be compared at all with the relationship between Sweden and Norway.

Can you understand the provocation it was when Jesus made a Samaritan the hero of his parable?

How can we, the people of the YMCA, understand people from other religions and let them meet love and respect before they meet prejudice and violence?

Through different inputs we would like to challenge you to wrestle with these issues and then, on Saturday morning, try to take those issues down to your local YMCA realities and commit yourselves to do something.

At the end of this speech I will return to the conclusions of the letter which was sent to YMCAs around the world from the participants in Catch the Vision 2004 in Kosovo,

organised by us. Catch the Vision is organised every second year, and is one of the most exciting events we are organising. Please join us in the search for our Christian vision. In Prizren, Kosovo, all of us, Christians and Muslims, embarked upon a journey of reflection, a journey to the inside of us to search for a common vision of peace.

“We were all members of YMCA, and we also happened to be Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant and Muslim. We visited a Mosque and listened to the Imam. We visited a Church and listened to the Priest.

Peace can only be founded in truth, built on justice, be inspired and integrated by love and practiced in freedom.

To begin this journey, we needed to create a safe space; a space in our hearts valuing diversity, somewhere we could take risks with one another and learning by listening to one another.

Christians and Muslims together in Prizren in Kosovo in search for a common vision for peace committed to only do apart the things we cannot do together and do together all the things we share, and thus to embark upon a common journey of peace.”

These different voices bring to my ears the sound of the Blue Music. The challenges are huge, but there are solutions and visions for a common future, and we are called to be the carriers of those visions and to demonstrate to the world that mankind in its totality belongs to the love of our Father and therefore belong to the many rooms that constitute the fellowship which we call our own.

Johan Vilhelm Eltvik