

"FACING MY NEIGHBOUR WITH OPEN HANDS"

EUROPEAN SECRETARY'S REPORT 1992/93

to the

EAY GENERAL ASSEMBLY, MAY 1993

(By Dölf Weder)

1. The Clown

Dear Friends

Once upon a time, there was a lovely clown. One of these good, cheerful clowns with a big, red nose, with wide, colourful trousers around his legs and with a small, brown violin in his hands. On his face, he always had a big, warm smile.

He lived and worked in a circus. Not a big circus, and not a small circus. But a circus and a clown loved by the people, especially the young people.

Times were not always easy for this circus. There were times of recession and economical disaster. There were times when governments changed their financial policies, and circuses no longer got public grants. Sometimes the clown was afraid the circus would no longer be able to have its own tent, or even some artists might have to be sent away. What would happen to the people then?

He knew that circuses and clowns are needed. The clown, for many people in the towns around, was a symbol of hope and joy and humanity. Hope, joy and humanity in the middle of a not always easy everyday-life. A life in which the strongest and the best and the fittest succeeded. But people know that not everybody is the strongest, and the best, and the fittest.

The clown showed them what really counted in life. He showed them that you can love and be loved, even if you are weak, even if you fall on your nose, even if you sometimes cry. People loved the clown and his big, warm smile. And he loved them.

But there was one big sadness in our clown's life. He got more and more aware that he was so limited in his thinking and experience. His thoughts only circled around in his limited circus circles. And with every passing year he had more difficulty to develop new ideas, to show his spectators the many sides of life. While people still loved him, he knew he should give them more. He should open their eyes to the bigger world. He should open their eyes to the many people in this world. To the people who think and live differently from them. To the people who suffer from injustice and poverty. To the people who would like to share their gifts and their human warmth with them.

He knew: Life was much more than life in this circus. Life was much deeper than he had experienced so far.

And so, one day, our clown decided to go on a journey. He had heard there was a man called Jesus. And people had told him that Jesus lived life in its fullness, and that He loved and was loved. That's what our clown was looking for: life in its fullness, to love and to be loved.

And so he took his rucksack and packed into it his small, brown violin, his wide, colourful trousers, and his big, red nose. And with the violin, the trousers and the nose in his rucksack, he directed his steps to the East, to Galilee, to find Jesus.

When wandering through the lands, it was not long before he met a gipsy girl. Her long black hair hanging over her dark brown face, she was sitting beside the road and crying.

"I'm a foreigner in this country", she said, "and because I'm not like the others, I'm cast out. I'm allowed to work here, but not to live."

The clown laid his arms around her shoulders and cried with her. But then he took his small, brown violin and gave it to the girl. "Take it and play it", he said, "and let its sound comfort you and the hearts of all suffering people around you."

Wandering further through the lands, it was not long before he met a mother with three children. Holding the youngest at her breast and the other two in her arm, she was sitting beside the road and crying. "Injustice, poverty and brutal war", she said, "have taken our father and everything; my children must now live naked."

The clown laid his arms around her and the children's shoulders and cried with them. But then he took his wide, colourful trousers and gave them to the family. "Take them and use them", he said, "they are big enough to give clothes for all three of your children."

Wandering further through the lands, it was not long before he met a young man. Having his head on his knees, he was sitting beside the road and crying. "I'm unemployed and cannot find a job", he said, "nobody needs me, and I'm worth nothing."

The clown laid his arms around his shoulders and cried with him. But then he took his big, red nose and gave it to the young man. "Take it and put it on your nose", he said, "and I will teach you how to be a good and human clown".

Finally, after many weeks and months, our clown arrived in Galilee. He went to Nazareth, knocked at Jesus' door and walked into His house.

A man was sitting in the room.

"Are you Jesus?", asked the clown, "People told me that Jesus lives life in its fullness, He loves and is loved".

"Dear friend", responded the man, "Jesus died 2000 years ago, you cannot meet Him here."

The clown broke out in tears. "Then my whole journey was in vain. And my life will continue to circle around in my old, limited circus circles."

"Don't be sad", answered the man, "you've already met Jesus three times on your way here. Whenever you meet a person and open your hands, you also meet Jesus. And you make an experience of fullness of life, you love and you are loved."

The clown stood there, surprised and silent. He dried his tears and started a smile. But then, after a further thought, he sadly answered: "But now all my gifts have gone. There's nothing left I could share."

"Your hands are empty", replied the man, "because you faced your neighbours with open hands. But love means giving and receiving. And only empty hands can receive. Open your hands for your neighbours again. And your empty hands will be filled."

The clown opened his hands, and the man gave him a wonderful Pan Flute. "Take this shepherd's flute", he said, "take it back to your circus. And whenever you perform as a clown, play one piece on this flute for your people."

Let them listen to the sound of eternity. Let them listen to the sound of love. Let them understand that the world is much bigger than their circus. Let them experience love and to be loved, to receive and to give, to give and to receive."

The clown stood there, with the flute in his hands. His heart felt warm, and on his face he had a deep and happy smile.

"I will go back to my circus", he said, "I will tell my people that I met Jesus. I will blow my flute, and we will face our neighbours, with open hands, to love and to be loved, in the fullness of life."

2. The Difficult European Environment 1992/93

Dear Friends

The past year was for Europe certainly not the easiest year. Europe has become vulnerable in many respects. This is not only true for Central and Eastern Europe, but also for Western Europe.

In the East, we are confronted with the bitter legacy of forty or even seventy years of communist rule. Economical and social recovery is difficult and needs time and patience. The environmental damages are enormous and represent a threat to the whole of Europe and Asia.

In addition, we get more and more aware that the real damage has been done to the souls of people. For them, to be suddenly exposed to a totally different way of thinking and acting, means high psychological stress. And to find yourself all of a sudden fully responsible for your life, and this in difficult times, is frightening, disturbing and hard to take.

Despite all these difficulties, most young people are still optimistic when looking to their long-term future. But when having to act in the present difficult

environment, they are often deeply frustrated about all the obstacles and the slow pace of progress. A lot of them are even resigning themselves and losing hope and power for the present.

The Western European societies have their own difficulties. They are fighting with economic recession and with a loss of trust in the political establishment.

People expect more honesty and trustworthiness in politics.

And in economical terms, the present recession even confronts so far economically strong countries like Finland with serious problems. Unemployment rates steadily increase. The EC presently counts 17 million unemployed, a lot of them young people.

As one of the consequences, financial pressures and significant cuts in social budgets do not surprise, but are seriously affecting several YMCA movements.

It is also quite obvious that the will and the possibilities to support Central and Eastern Europe more strongly, remain limited.

3. The YMCA in this Environment

And how does the YMCA react in this changing environment?

Differently in the West and in the East, is my observation.

In Central and Eastern Europe, there is a great awareness that the YMCA can only develop and survive as a Christian youth movement and in intensive international cooperation.

In these YMCAs, the emphasis on the YMCA as a Christian youth movement and as an international movement is highly developed. Not only in the sense of depending on international financial support. But for many of these movements, their Christian identity and international giving and receiving are major forces of motivation and encouragement.

For these movements, the European Alliance and international cooperation is not only a kind of luxury whipped cream on a Sunday cake, but an important ingredient of their every-day bread.

This does not seem to always be the case for Western European YMCAs.

We have observed several Western European YMCAs which reduced their international involvement when getting under internal pressure.

It's a bit comparable with a family where each one goes to its own room to cry when in difficulty; - as opposed to a family where the members sit and struggle together.

Of course, this is also a reflection of the limited role the European Alliance is able to play. We do not have a lot of instruments to deal with national movements in difficulty.

But I'm still 100% convinced that international solidarity and cooperation is not only luxury whipped cream on a Sunday cake, but an important ingredient of our every-day YMCA bread.

Facing our neighbours with open hands, giving and receiving, receiving and giving, is essential for the mission, for the renewal, and for the whole further development of our movement, - and this globally.

We can only continue to encourage each of you and each of your movements to stay with our family and to work together, - also in difficult times, - and especially in difficult times.

4. The EAY

For the European Alliance, last year's adoption of the "EAY Strategy for the '90s" has already proven to be not only an intellectual exercise.

It has clarified the role of the Alliance, has set the priorities for the coming years and put down some very clear goals and objectives to be achieved.

The responsibility and the involvement of the members of the EAY Executive Committee have been considerably increased. Everybody has a well defined working responsibility.

And it is this working partnership between volunteers and staff which enables the EAY to cope with a work load the small professional team would never be able to cope with alone.

You can observe yourself that for example this General Assembly is not a show drawn up and run by the European Secretariat. But it is a highly structured event, taken responsibility for and designed by all members of the Executive, plus a lot of other leaders.

But let me now highlight some special EAY developments and some strong challenges for our future.

5. Youth and Programme Exchange

Last year's General Assembly formally introduced "Youth and Programme Exchange" as a new EAY Working Field

And we are all convinced that this new Field will have a high relevance for the European YMCAs in the '90s.

However, the start was, and still is, difficult. The establishing of a new EAY staff position for exchange, identified as a need by an expert group and announced at the last General Assembly, had to be given up, - once more due to lack of finances.

The Executive Committee then decided last October to work with a decentralised approach, using strong National Coordinators and giving a coordinating role to the European Secretariat.

The first scheme in this new Working Field is presently being launched. It is the "Volunteers for Europe" programme, and it focuses on long-term, mid-term and short-term exchanges of volunteers.

For the summer of this year, the "Professionals for Europe" programme is scheduled to take off. It will deal with exchanges of professional YMCA workers.

And finally, during autumn, a third scheme described in the "EAY Strategy for the '90s" will follow: The "Friends for Europe" programme; an international fellowship of local associations and individuals who subscribe to certain European services and commitments.

The "Volunteers for Europe" programme so far had a positive echo, both on national and local level. Around half of our movements have joined the scheme.

It is too early to speak about facts and figures. And we want to start step by step and not with a "big bang". But we are confident that the first EAY Introduction Course and first exchanges will start this summer. And we are convinced that this programme has a great potential for further development.

One interesting observation I would like to share here: In several countries, we have local associations and individuals who have got in contact with the European Secretariat because they would like to get involved in these programmes. But they are experiencing internal blockages and lack of response in their National Movement.

I can only encourage all movements to be aware of the high interest of many of your local associations. Please do everything you can to enable your local YMCAs to participate in these promising new schemes!

Please also note that a lot of National Movements as well as the EAY will in future only deal with international placements under the new European schemes. We recommend everybody to do the same. Otherwise we could easily end up with two categories of volunteers in the same field and with "sorry, but we are not responsible for you and cannot help you" situations.

6. The European Programme Field

About the manifold successes and challenges in the European Programme Field, a lot could be said. Now is not the time to mention all of them. I refer you to the Sub-Plenary on European Programmes.

However, special reference must be made to two subjects. One is the recent EAY-Seminar on "YMCA between Nationalism and National Identity".

The problem of growing nationalism is an extremely important issue in today's Europe. Nationalism was the tragedy of Europe throughout its history.

The brutal murdering in ex-Yugoslavia, based on fanatic nationalism, is and must be a matter of concern for us all.

Because in our countries, too, nationalistic thinking is growing. In some cases, it is in the form of the classical discrimination and marginalisation of ethnical or cultural minorities. In other cases, it is prejudices and animosities against foreigners, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

YMCAs would be well advised to thoughtfully address these burning issues.

A new European Programme Group, "EMRAS", is being established under Dutch leadership at present. It replaces our former Traiskirchen Refugee Field Group and will address with a wide perspective the whole issue of Migrants, Refugees and Asylum Seekers.

We recommend National Movements to consider participation in this group. A respective Linking Activity at this Assembly will enable a first contact among people interested.

7. Christian Orientation and Leadership Development

According to the "EAY Strategy for the '90s", main emphasis is put in all three Working Fields on Christian Orientation and on Leadership Development.

Over the last years, the Christian Orientation group has developed new instruments to deal with their task.

I refer to the "Järvelä Manifesto" of the Christian Orientation Workshop '93, published in one of the last EAY Mailings. The group is also responsible for the spiritual dimension of our General Assemblies. And it plans a special "C-Workshop" for this summer in Finland. This pilot project will enable a small, international group of volunteer leaders in their early twenties to come and live together in the Finnish outdoors, and reflect on the Christian dimension of their leadership role.

In the field of Leadership Development, goals and strategic directions for a new approach are laid down in the "EAY Strategy for the '90s". A Sub-Plenary at this Assembly will try to identify ways to implement them.

8. Representation in International Bodies

The EAY Representation system continues to be effective and well coordinated. At this General Assembly, the meeting of the EAY representatives is included for the first time in the main programme and therefore open to all delegates.

During the last year, new emphasis has been put on strengthening our presence in European church bodies, - quite successfully it can be reported. Experience from several meetings shows that the YMCA can play and must play a prominent role in representing the voice of young people, especially of young women.

9. Intermovement Cooperation

EAY's most time- and staff-intensive Working Field was certainly also during the past year Intermovement Cooperation.

And despite all the difficulties and limitations, the European YMCAs and their international partners can be really proud of the many positive developments. We have today an international IMC-network in which - in one or the other way - almost all of our National Movements are involved.

In January, a prominent expert from the European Youth Centre of the Council of Europe made a comprehensive evaluation of our IMC-work in the five Saphir countries.

The EAY can be highly satisfied with the findings. The expert mentions the sensitive, participatory and process-orientated approach applied by the EAY and its staff, the dependency-minimising, multi-lateral process chosen with the establishment of the EAY Field Groups, and last but not least: the good results achieved.

It became evident that the European Alliance of YMCAs is one of the few international youth organisations having a well reflected, professional strategy for the whole of Central and Eastern Europe.

This high appreciation of EAY IMC work is an incentive to continue on a high quality level and to deepen the multi-lateral cooperation between all the partners involved.

In one IMC field, we so far are not yet satisfied with the European role. It is the field of the CIS States, the Commonwealth of Independent States.

Our American partners, both, the USA and Canada, as well as our CIS partners themselves, want to work in partnership with the European YMCAs.

The EAY has a clear IMC Development Strategy, well defined Working Principles and clear goals. They are valid for the CIS States, too.

But so far, the involvement of the European YMCAs was on a scale which does not allow a significant role in this field to be played.

We should not be over-selfcritical. Our European IMC-plate is just too full. We prefer to do fewer things to a high quality than a lot of things with a lack of professionalism.

But it must be said that this enormous challenge does exist, and substantial developments will take place. Either we Europeans will be part of it, or we shall have the role of spectators.

10. Perspectives for the future

As a last point, I have to speak about some strong challenges regarding our EAY future.

The European Alliance has grown considerably during the past four years.

Today, it brings together the biggest number of national member movements of all YMCA areas in the world. And although we are not the biggest in terms of programme participants and employees, we have with more than 7'000 local associations the highest number of local YMCAs of any region.

And we have of all the established YMCA Areas the smallest professional staff.

It is only due to the Saphir- and other Initiatives that we presently have professionals to support our Central and Eastern European movements at least with a minimal staff presence.

But we do not have enough personnel capacity to adequately accompany the new YMCA members in the South and YMCA movements in crisis in the West.

And we have to face the fact that the Saphir Initiative will come to its end in March 1994, while the 5+2 Initiative has been terminated already.

The EAY Executive Committee has intensively discussed the resulting perspectives and has worked out three scenarios and their consequences.

Scenario 1: "The Worst-Case Scenario"

If nothing substantial happens, the EAY will be back to the old 2-person staff by April 1994: Regula and Dölf, - plus an annual administrative deficit of some 50'000 SFr.

There will be no more Johan Vilhelm in Poland and Hungary, no more Michael Wardlow in Bulgaria, Slovakia and in the Czech Republic and no more Christoph in the European office.

The mentioned annual administrative deficit of 50'000 SFr. will demand additional measures or further significant cuts in EAY services.

Scenario 3: "The Best-Case Scenario"

Of course, we still strongly hope there will be one or the other kind of Saphir follow-up Initiative, which would considerably change the picture.

An urgent need is evident. The external evaluator came to the same conclusion.

The essential point of such a follow-up initiative is not so much project-money that goes into the countries, - such monies can be found from other sources, too - . The essential point is sufficient Field Staff to continue the vital accompaniment of national, regional and local leaders.

The EAY Executive Committee, therefore, has submitted a formal request for a Saphir follow-up Initiative to the YMCA of the USA.

In the best case, this would mean a continuation of the two field staff positions, and of the administrative post in St. Gallen.

It is difficult to estimate the probability of this scenario. Signals and messages vary. But the EAY is well advised to not build its future on such hope only.

That leaves the question of a "Scenario 2", somewhere in the middle.

Scenario 2: "The EAY Development Secretary Scenario"

This scenario tries to cover at least the EAY minimum needs and prevent the Alliance from falling back to the old, but now completely insufficient 2-person operation.

The EAY would try to find money for a new EAY Development Secretary post. She or he would become the right hand of the European Secretary in the field, accompanying the movements in Central and Eastern Europe, as well as being available for supporting movements in the South and in the West.

The EAY would also try to keep the second administrative post in St. Gallen. This is critical for coping with the Youth and Programme Exchange schemes and remaining involved at least in some IMC fields. The position must be largely covered by operational income: reason for administrative charges in the exchange schemes and for the newly introduced IMC-levy of 8%.

First contacts with possible funding sources have been made. But a lot of hard work and good will will still be needed if we should reach the vital goals of this second scenario.

We have now spoken about three scenarios only. Of course, variations and combinations are possible.

But it is important for this General Assembly to be aware that the European Alliance is at a crossroads.

Past Assemblies have taken decisions for considerable expansion of the EAY. Last year, it adopted the ambitious "EAY Strategy for the '90s".

The means to do so, were available because of various grants, initiatives and IMC support.

But now such outside funding is likely to diminish, or at least uncertain. The European YMCAs have to make a decision whether they are able and ready to financially carry out what they designed and decided or whether they have to live again with an inadequate European Alliance.

And this leads us to the question of EAY membership fees.

EAY Membership Fees

After the bigger step, when the EAY moved from Kassel to St. Gallen, EAY fees should have risen annually by 5%. This would have covered inflation. - Not to speak about financing the substantial expansion that actually took place.

Last year, the General Assembly adopted a motion requesting the Executive to look for ways to include a European Travel Fund into the EAY budget. We are talking about a volume of some 50'000 SFr. per year.

But the reality does not look so good. The EAY had to write-off certain contributions and had to significantly reduce fees of some member-movements who are facing financially difficult times. As result, the total income from membership contributions has in fact remained on more or less the same level over the past years - and it is even likely to decrease this year.

The EAY Accounts can presently only be balanced because of high income for services provided, because of increased grant aid from European bodies, and because of considerable financial support from Swiss sources.

Which means in figures, that the EAY had last year a total turn-over of some 1 1/2 million Swiss Francs. And the national EAY fees amounted to modest 185'000 SFr.

My task here is not to present proposals for solutions. For this we will have proper Plenary-Sessions and a Sub-Plenary.

But this is the question: Are we able, and are we ready, to finance the EAY as we have designed it during the past Assemblies and with the services we expect the EAY to deliver?

If our answer is "yes", then some significant steps will have to be taken.

If our answer is or must be "no", then we will have to live with the consequences.

11. Conclusion

Dear Friends

Coming to the end of my report, and despite the strong challenges I have just explained, I want to say that my feelings are extremely positive.

In many joint efforts, we have achieved a lot of good results.

We have also failed sometimes or were hindered by the limitations we have to live with. That is true, too.

And while we know exactly what we want and what our goals are, we nevertheless find ourselves confronted with some major difficulties and some strong challenges regarding our common future.

But it is with great gratitude that I want to thank our Lord and Saviour for all the generous blessings he has again granted the European YMCAs during the past year.

I would also like to thank all the many volunteer EAY workers, both laymen and professionals, who gave the EAY its distinct face during the past months.

I would like to thank our professional staff, both in the field and in St. Gallen, for their highly professional work and for their deep motivation and dedication.

A special and warm thanks goes to Dietrich Reitzner for all the pioneering work he has carried out over many years in Central and Eastern Europe.

And last, but not least, I would like to thank all of you, our National Movements, for your precious support and cooperation.

"Facing our neighbour with open hands", that is our task and challenge for now and for the year to come.

Together, and with our Lord's blessing, we can be strong and relevant. Together, and with our Lord's blessing, we can make a difference to the lives of many young people.

And remember our clown: "I will go back to my circus", he said, "I will tell my people that I met Jesus. I will blow my flute, and we will face our neighbours, with open hands, to love and to be loved, in the fullness of life.

Thank you.