



SECRETARY GENERAL'S REPORT

"Message in a Bottle"

YMCA EUROPE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Manchester, May 10th 2013

ymca 
europe

SECRETARY GENERAL'S REPORT

"MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE"

YMCA EUROPE'S GENERAL ASSEMBLY. MANCHESTER, MAY 2013

I. Our message

Last year we shared thoughts about the relation between our roots and our leaves. "The YMCA movement deeply rooted and multiple branches stretching out from our common tree producing fresh and visible leaves..." We had just completed the first year of our new Strategic Plan and – I must confess now – that vision was quite an internal one. We were looking inside ourselves, reflecting about our mission (the roots) and our leaves (our outcomes, programmes, initiatives). The visible expression of those leaves was the first of our three signature programmes : Peace, Justice and Democracy.

As we continue strengthening the "Roots and Leaves concept" focusing on the second flagship programme - "Healthy Living"- I want to start my report challenging you to collectively take one more step forward.

This year I would like to concentrate in our **message**. Over the past twelve months we took time to elaborate and deliver a consistent message. We kept eyes and ears wide open, paying attention to your inputs during the last GA and the reports coming from our working platforms and ad hoc groups. It was a pleasure and a privilege doing it and some of our common achievements in the past year were possible because of that joint work. Thank you!

"Ake Viking was a lonely Swedish sailor who decided to try his luck searching for love in quite an original way. He wrote a simple letter under the title "To Someone Beautiful and Far Away," added his address and the request to answer back, put it inside a bottle, and tossed it overboard hoping that it might help him find a young woman to marry.

Two years later, in 1958, he was surprised to receive a letter from a Sicilian girl, Paolina, who said, "I am not beautiful, but it seems so miraculous that this little bottle should have traveled so far and long to reach me that I must send you an answer". The two began writing one another and, three years after he threw a bottle into the sea, Ake moved to Sicily to marry his very long-distance love".

This was in the newspapers all over the world at that time and it was recorded as a true story. As most success stories, it all started with a wish in someone's heart.

(Song "Message in a Bottle" The Police. Performed by M. Winter, S. Vogt)

I find that there are not so many differences between that "old fashioned, quite romantic and certainly naïf" way of writing messages and the sophisticated ways we use today. In the end, it is the same mysterious moment : you throw a request to the open sea ... or you deliver a message to the world, closing your eyes and hoping that some time later – months, weeks, minutes ... or seconds - it will reach someone. But who is on the other end ready to receive it? Is our message finally reaching someone? And if it does, how will it be interpreted?

All of us talk about great networks and how easy it is to reach thousands, millions with just one "click" or with an attractive and convincing message. The YMCA messages are not an exception and we generally put lots of work and passion in planning and sending out the right message. But are we being listened? How to make our message visible and relevant as everyone seems to be desperately seeking for inputs out there?

I often reflect about the potential of our network and our capacity to make messages travel in a natural and effective way from the local to the national level, from the international to the national level and then back to the local....

According to our last year's statistics, YMCAs in Europe are present in **5,574 locations** with more than **100,000 volunteers** and almost **22,000 staff**, reaching **2 million** people.

Those ingredients should be more than enough to elaborate, send out and constantly exchange messages - at least among us - in a unique and effective way. Especially considering what we see and experience every day : to be connected is a must!

Our **Strategic Plan** sets clear messages according to the priorities and flagship programmes that we agreed to develop in the next years. But are those messages reaching all corners of our European movement?

Is it that we are not listening enough what the world is telling us? And if I am not listening to the world, which message am I sending out?

Being part of a movement as the YMCA today – just as it was 169 years ago - means a close observation of the world. It is a constant look with critical eyes to what is happening around us and acting with all consequences. Behind each activity or each plan or each publication, there has to be an answer to the message that we receive from the world either well wrapped inside a bottle in a lonely shore in the edge of an ocean, or in our personal screens using sophisticated new technologies.

Being aware of the message Europe is sending us today, the more effective our answer will be.

(To the group : What do you think Europe's message is today?)

Terms like crisis, social exclusion, unemployment, lack of opportunities... have become usual in our daily lives no matter the areas of Europe we live in. They are present in the large cities or in the rural contexts. That is a clear message that we as an European YMCA movement are called to answer. As we celebrated Europe's Day yesterday May 9th, involved in this European Year of Citizenship promoted by the European Union, there is a consistent message that our European movement has been spreading around our continent for the last 40 years : Unity, Peace and Opportunities are possible. Our own history of achievements and our actual approach to the "construction of Europe with solidarity and justice" are living examples.

In my report I will share with you the facts. Those facts that show in which way we have given the best of ourselves to provide concrete answers to challenges over the past months. I have seen you - all of us - actively involved in creating that message and sending it out to society through actions, programmes, personal attitude and faith. From our own and unique social and cultural realities I have seen you doing what Jesus would have done if he had the extraordinary tools, network and message that the YMCA has.

II. Our Message translated into Action

Far from being only the Secretary General's report, this can very well be considered the common report of all those who have been involved in YMCA Europe over this year. Our Executive Committee, our Staff, all our working and task groups, the National Movements and our partners.

Maybe not always in a deliberate way, but definitely we made efforts to gather everyone around the same objective : to develop and implement our Strategic Plan.

Under Priority 1 : Mission Awareness / Advocacy / Representation, we stressed that each of our steps is :

- inspired by our Christian ecumenical mission and
- moved by an open and creative spirit and actively involving young people.

Based on those objectives, our YE staff was involved in UNIFY Conference 2012 and started to take part in the planning process of the 2014 Conference. 2014 will focus on the "Inclusive Christianity" signature programme and we will experience this ecumenical approach throughout the year.

The Youth Policy Group started as official working group within our structure in 2012. It strengthened its representation at the Advisory Council of Youth and its groups on Youth Work and Pool of Trainers. YE is also represented at statutory meetings at the European Youth Forum. Last March the 1st Youth Policy Group newsletter was released.

We linked this initial work of the Youth Policy Group with our first collective effort to approach some of the key European institutions in Brussels last November with 33 NGS's and guests. This step is much more coherent when it is taken in a coordinated way with the mentioned youth focused internal platforms.

The YES Group elected a New Board and started the design of their new strategic plans for the next years. The application for 2013 Seminar "Just Link It" was successful through YMCA England. YES was present among NGS's through a statement based on real youth empowerment. The YES Board was also actively involved in WAY's Change Agents project with 45 participants from Europe plus a Change Agent Trainer (G. Tosserams) and trainings will take place throughout the year here in Manchester, in June in Norway (thank you Y Global!) and in the Autumn through our Staff.

Reports from National Movements at 2012-2013 GA's were included in working documents and the format of NGS meeting was changed. Adjustments were made in our Staff Team implementing the Strategy with a pan-European approach.

We worked on our alignment with NEW WAY (World Alliance of YMCAs) Strategy, providing input and support to the **Youth Empowerment In Action** project and motivating National Movements across Europe to be involved in the YMCA global dimension.

The 2nd Movement Strengthening Conference was held in March, Litomyšl, Czech Republic. Field and Partner groups started a reflection process on the future of our Movement Strengthening approach. Complementary, since our last GA, 23 European National Movements were visited by YE Staff or Executive Committee members providing input on different areas of work or attending specific events.

Under our Strategic Priority 2, Relevant Programmes, the Programme Department was formally created with 2 executive secretaries, 2 project managers supported by specific projects (Roots for Reconciliation and Balkan Programme) and a Programme Extended Team which is now in the process of identifying priorities and tasks.

In 2012 we focused on **Peace/Justice/Democracy** during the GA and throughout the year including a publication with outcomes from key note speakers and groups' work during the GA.

Seminars in Shushi (Nagorno Karabakh) in August and Istanbul (Turkey) in October involved a total of 92 young people from different European contexts. Our "Roots for Reconciliation" programme was renewed and our relation with "Bread for the World", the Protestant Development Service in Germany, was strengthened. Also new steps forward were taken in the Balkans through the Programme Initiative Centers and the support from Y's Men International – Denmark.

Our other signature programme - **Healthy Living** – is the main focus of this GA and here in Manchester we will listen to different keynote speakers and to your own

feedback on physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing before publishing our next document on this issue.

World Challenge in Europe was a success last October 13th with YMCA England's (K. Montgomery) good co-ordination and the involvement of 32 National Movements following the World Alliance guidance. 54.223 participants across Europe receiving and giving the same message on the same day and joining hundreds of thousands across the YMCA world! It was much more than celebrating the fact that YMCA created the sport of basketball... much more than gathering thousands of people shooting basketballs at the same time across Europe and the world. It was a shared feeling of belonging to the same global movement, expressing our guiding principles.

UNIFY 2014 planning started and Michal Szymanczak and myself were at the first session last January in Munich. Our Christian Orientation Group was strengthened after UNIFY 2012 and we want to continue extending our Christian message and identity in an inclusive way.

Our Board and Advisory Board at the Training Centre in Litomyšl were renewed in September, including several new members that can better represent YMCA Europe's interests. We were blessed by a deeper involvement of the Czech YMCA providing several of their key volunteer leaders to the TC Board.

The National General Secretaries Forum was created in November and agreements on further steps regarding our joint work (and meetings until 2014) were taken, including the creation of a task group on EU issues. Our Canadian partners supported that first meeting in Brussels and already committed to do the same this year.

Finally, our 3rd Priority – Sustainability – with its different aims also saw a number of important developments since we last gathered at a GA.

A smooth transition process allowed the new Executive Committee led by President Ed Eggink took their responsibilities in governance immediately after the elections in May last year. Areas of work and commitments were spread among ExCom members and decisions started to be taken by the new team based on good communication and effective supporting materials.

As I announced one year ago the annual Implementation Plan of our Strategy was designed and is being developed already this year. It is work in progress and we will continue to "polish it", adding new elements such as a budget connected to each programme, staff time and more clear indicators to measure impact. You will find the Implementation / Action Plan in pages 67-84 of your working documents and I will refer to it later in my report. May I now take the opportunity, once again, to thank and congratulate my Staff for the good work, vision and passion that each of them is putting into this technical work from each of their positions and areas of responsibility.

We have started a dialogue among our YERT (YMCA Europe Resource Team) members which most significant expression was our meeting here in Manchester during this GA.

The process includes updates in our structure and a new approach to interventions and to specific National Movements.

Speaking about **Sustainability**, our Treasurer Mike Will is ready to report – with all details – about our 2012 accounts. We had a good financial year which allowed us to pay off some remaining debts. We continued being strict and transparent developing our responsibilities in the administration of the (always limited) resources, many of them coming from your National Movements and the generosity of our friends across Europe and North America.

As agreed last year the process to review the annual contribution system has started and a key step will be taken during this GA.

A parallel process that is also being provided to all of you is the one we started with our 2nd Fundraising Conference held last January in Madrid. A fundraising network is being created with the great help of our friends from the US and England as we prepare for the next Conference with relevant contents for the European movement.

Dear friends,

These are the highlights of our message in the past year. Hopefully a clear and direct one aligned with our mission and responding to concrete internal and external needs.

As I travelled across Europe in the past year, I clearly saw who are both the main receivers and senders of our messages. **It is young people**. I want to use this opportunity to share some examples :

In May I was in Russia and in Ivanovo I met Alyona, a volunteer leading a group of young people in her local YMCA. A few weeks later visiting our youngest European YMCA – Montenegro – I was amazed by young people like Andrija and his impact on other youth.

July took me to Armenia and Nagorno Karabakh and there I met David, another example of a young person leading a YMCA and able to facilitate meetings with the Speaker of Parliament and governmental representatives. That same month in Madrid I attended the YMCA World urban Network Conference with key YMCA world leaders gathered this time in a European country hosted by our Spanish friends. Both “peters” Pedro Fueyo NGS from Spain and Peter Posner, our former President, highlighted our European profile at this key international event. In August and September we had fruitful follow up meetings with Ed Eggink, Mike Will and the new Executive Committee in Madrid, Prague and Brussels.

In October I had the privilege of speaking at the YMCA – YWCA Staff Conference in Stuttgart. Among the high number of young YMCA professionals, I met Ulla from the Helsinki YMCA and became enthusiastic about her proposal to strengthen the European YMCA network of recreational centers. October was also the month of our

Seminar in Istanbul and there I met Sabine, one of the young participants. The quality of the sessions, the Turkish context and especially the more than 50 young people like Sabine, made me reflect about the impact of our message in the diversity of our contexts.

A few days later I sat with Johan Vilhelm Eltvik and my colleagues from the Global Staff Team in Sao Paulo, Brazil the hometown of Romulo Dantas, today Executive Secretary for Youth Empowerment at the WAY and an example of effective and inspiring youth leadership.

In November I returned to Brussels, this time with most NGS as I shared before. And we were very glad to have the full participation there of Gerard from The Netherlands, our Change Agent Trainer and active in the Youth Policy Group. Also from The Netherlands is Maria and together with the rest of the Festival Steering Group we met again in Kaub, Germany before I was invited to attend the Regional Secretaries meeting of the German YMCA in Berlin.

This year started with the Fundraising Conference in Madrid and another young face appeared there. It was Mario from Siderno in Italy. A few days later Michal Szymanczak and I attended the UNIFY Conference planning hosted by the Munich YMCA and I met Christina who shared about her passion for youth work at one of the local YMCAs we visited.

February and March took me to Setubal in Portugal, to Dunford House here in England for WAY's NGS meeting and to Prague for our Festival related meetings and Litomysl for the Movement Strengthening Conference and our Executive Committee.

More young faces and participation in April in Jericho – like Uku from Estonia – one of the young European representatives at WAY's Executive Committee. Now I have just returned from Bosnia and Serbia where Hana represents the YMCA in Backy Petrovac leading programmes for youth, children and families.

A year of travels through the memories of my sharing with some of the young people I met across Europe. These were not just photos of smiling young people in the screen. They are the eyes, the faces and the voice of the YMCA across Europe. Through them we receive and send our holistic message having them in the core of our movement.

III. Work Plan 2013 and next steps together

In the working documents of this GA, you received our YE Strategy **Implementation Plan** for this year. Under the 3 strategic priorities you will find the description, key activities, inputs, means of verification and indicators of the 12 aims that are part of our Strategic Plan :

Mission Awareness – Advocacy – Representation

- Aim 1. Christian Orientation
- Aim 2. Youth Participation
- Aim 3. Youth Policy
- Aim 4. European and Global Co-operation

Relevant Programmes

- Aim 1. Peace, Justice and Democracy
- Aim 2. Healthy Living
- Aim 3. Inclusive Christianity
- Aim 4. Festivals and Events
- Aim 5. Education, Training and Leadership Development
- Aim 6. Ad Hoc Groups / Initiatives

Sustainability

- Aim 1. Institutional Viability
- Aim 2. Resource Mobilization

We take this work as one more step in our wish to share with our Member Movements much more about the reality and actions led by YMCA Europe. But these are not complete and are not totally accurate without the involvement of the whole European movement. Our message is not complete without your input. Some of the actions developed by National Movements are already included in the log-frames and we would like to see many more in the future.

Using methods like this and strengthening platforms like all our task groups and working platforms, we are also increasing our capacity to cooperate involving all levels of our network. We need to clearly advance in measuring the impact of our work and message, making our YE Strategy visible and relevant for all. It will bring us to a situation in which we not only together develop YE Strategy but also together are able to implement it.

We have now an exciting, excellent opportunity to take a huge step forward. It is coming up in just 3 months in Prague and it is our **Festival LOVE 2 LIVE**. More than 4.000 participants have already decided to join and there is space for many more. It was an intense and sensitive planning work. Now everything is ready in Prague to receive all of you and, together, deliver a message to Europe... to the world. Our YMCA message. Help us continue spreading our (your) event across the movement!

Finally,

This is the message I wanted to share with you today and I did it humbly on behalf of our Executive Committee, our President and our Staff Team, the persons I am blessed to work daily. I hope that it was clear enough helping you to have a good picture about what we have done and where we are heading together. All of you are included in this journey.

Dear friends, please be ready to reflect about the message that you personally and on behalf of your YMCAs want to write. Think about a relevant message and send it out to the world... But also be ready, every day, to receive that mysterious bottle coming probably especially to you, waived by the sea, with a unique and...maybe life-changing message.

“Consequently, faith comes from hearing the MESSAGE, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” Romans 10 : 17

Thank you.

Notes :

- **The report was delivered using a power point presentation**
- **YMCA Europe’s Strategy Implementation Plan 2013 was presented at the GA after the Secretary General’s report.**



