

Secretary General's report to the European Alliance of YMCAs General Assembly, Litomyšl, Czech Republic May 5, 2005

“ROADMAP”

“There are only two lasting bequests we can give our offspring. One is roots, the other wings.”

Patrik is 20 years old, a handsome young man. He is looking out of the bus windows. Snow everywhere. The mountains are wild and beautiful. There is a dignified peace over the snow-covered scenery. Breathtaking beauty. It is not easy for him to tell me his story, he does not like to return to the painful memories, and they also sound like scenes from a horror movie. War is surrounding his hometown, slowly also his home. Soldiers sneaking closer, seeking cover behind stones and walls, afraid of resistance. Suddenly they are there, pushing his father up against the car, guns in his face, Patrik is hiding, his heart is beating like a steam engine, he has never felt this kind of fear, panic. The soldiers discuss with loud voices. They find Patrik, push him out of the door, they decide to shoot them immediately. Then a police officer shows up from nowhere and stops them. They have not done anything, stop this! The discussion goes on, but the policeman wins, he is the strongest. They were not all war criminals. That is why Patrik is still alive and sitting with some YMCA friends in the Blue Bus.

Driving from his hometown Prizren in Kosovo towards a Serb enclave. I have made that trip in winter and I know how beautiful it is, how scary the narrow roads and steep hills are, how surprising it is to see the big Ukrainian Military force defending the enclaves, and how depressive the atmosphere is in the enclaves. Murat is the leader of Kosovo YMCA, which together with Nagorno Karabach is our youngest National Movement in Europe. Murat read the present EAY Role and Strategy. The preamble is using a bus journey as a metaphor. Murat bought a bus for the YMCA and called it the Blue Bus. The Blue Bus is on its way to another Serb enclave to tell them about YMCA, to demonstrate it and invite Serb youngsters to participate in the multi ethnic, multi language YMCA. And Patrik with his painful memories of war is one of the guys on the Blue Bus, driving between wild mountains on a mission of reconciliation.

It is a YMCA vision with a diesel engine. It is the EAY Strategy with 16 wheels to make it roll and move and kick and work. The Blue Bus is real, and is doing a fantastic job.

There are plenty of conflicts around the world, inside and around most of those conflicts we have YMCAs and thousands of hands and arms and legs and heads of the YMCA. Can you imagine Blue Busses of YMCA peacemakers moving on all continents on missions of peace and reconciliation? It is happening in Kosovo.

YMCA is everywhere, and if we had been able to modernise the way we organise ourselves, we would have received the Nobel Peace Prize before Amnesty. I have no interest in competing with Amnesty, I am a member of that organisation myself, but they are so much better organised and we should learn from them.

This is probably my main message today - let us modernise the grey way we work and think together in YMCA Europe, so that we can become stronger and better to play the Blue Music. And let us invest all our energy in creating a new Strategy for 2006-2011 so that we identify the right issues so that we can inspire people like Murat to create Blue tools to solve problems.

“There are only two lasting bequests we can give our offspring. One is roots, the other wings.”

I fell for this beautiful formulation in a very grey document from the Council of Europe.

My speech this year is intended to start the period of strategizing for 2006-2011, the new EAY Role and Strategy to be agreed next year by you. We will work for one year together to write it. We may end up far away from my thoughts here, but it is meant as a starting point.

I will first focus on our roots. I go through the recent history of the changes in Europe, which so much influenced the development of YMCA Europe so far. And I will highlight a man with the greatest influence on these changes. Then I will focus on our spiritual roots. Back again to recent YMCA-history: What have we concretely achieved that will be important for the next years.

From ROOTS I will go to WINGS. How do they look? Where will they bring us?

I. ROOTS – WHERE ARE WE COMING FROM?

Sometimes the good Lord above blesses us with leadership bigger than we deserve. Pope John Paul II, or John Paul the Great, as he is already referred to, demonstrated such leadership over many years.

A whole world gives thanks for his presence and leadership, important for so many people of our generation.

He came especially close to us. He was the Pope from Poland; he was born in a village outside Krakow, not far from Auschwitz.

When he was appointed Pope in 1978 he used his enormous spiritual authority, and in the footsteps of his visits to Poland the masses were organised and the first Solidarnos groups were formed and the strikes were about to take place in Gdansk and Gdynia and in other places in Poland.

The spiritual authority of John Paul II was joined by people like Sakharov, Solzhenitsyn, Lech Walesa and Vaclav Havel, just to mention a few, and they became stronger than any other authority, physical or ideological, and like the old walls in Jericho, the Berlin wall came tumbling down and our continent changed dramatically, and so did the YMCA.

When the EU was founded, political leaders of deep faith were leading the processes, the night before the most important treaties were signed; those leaders spent the night in a chapel in prayer.

When the Wall came down, the process had been led by people of deep faith.

The second way he came especially close to us was the way he always focused on young people. Wherever he went, he liked to communicate with young people. He even enjoyed sports enormously, and was a good skier, both cross-country and downhill. We are coming very close to body, mind and spirit here, aren't we?

"Continue to build YMCA in former Communist Europe."

And the night Pope John Paul the Great died, the Square of St Peter was filled by young people who were singing and praying and keeping the old Pope company during his last hours on earth and his last greeting to the youth was: "I always searched for you. Now you have come to me. For that I give you thanks!"

Allow me to be a bit personal as well. I feel real sadness by the loss this world has experienced. Of course John Paul II was human and had shortcomings. Still - there are so few

of this calibre, and there may be some time until we are again blessed with such loving and truly humble leadership.

The Pope has participated in writing history also for the YMCA, because of his authority based on Spirituality.

A few months after the Wall fell, I had my life put totally upside down and as a Lutheran, Protestant Minister was thrown into Catholic Poland to work with the re-emerging YMCA there.

Michal and many other friends in Poland took me for many years of Catholic training, until they kicked me over to Russia and my friends there gave me years of Orthodox training, and since then I have the feeling that I have a Catholic soul and an Orthodox heart and a Protestant past. Anyway, ecumenism is no longer the same for me; it changed from being a theoretical exercise for theologians to being a way of life.

It once was a man who walked towards a cross - and he was uplifted to that cross and he died. In the footsteps of this man from the cross, because he left it for his grave, and then he left his grave for eternal life, in his footsteps are we walking today. The Pope lifted the cross high and in the light of this symbol the Wall tumbled down and freedom came instead of prison, life came instead of death.

In these footsteps we walk today, and we walk in the same power, with the same authority, spiritual authority.

Followers of Jesus Christ.

II. ROOTS AS MYSTERY

In the Love of God there is no fear, says St. John. And since I have already focused on the Pope, allow me to quote from Luther. He says that inside the Love of God, at the core, the heart of God, there is a burning, flaming kitchen stove where everything, which is real, is born. Everything, which exists. I am who I am, Yahweh, says the Lord. Love is the real thing. Everything else, overwhelmingly present in our world, evil, violence, war, hatred, jealousy, those are not for real, we give them life, because we practice them. They will not last - only love will last, because in the Love of God there is no fear, there is no shadow. There is eternity.

The Blue Bus in Kosovo is full of people who could have practiced hatred and revenge and fear and creating fear. They practice reconciliation and create peace and love.

Why shall we go from fear to love? Because people in fear give life to evil, because they are afraid. In love we are free, free to change. Free to love. Inspired to serve.

How can we go from fear to love?

Through mystery only.

You have to kneel down at the roots of your life and receive the mystery.

The name of the mystery is simple. This mystery is what binds us together, Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants of all variations - the name of the mystery is forgiveness.

If there will be peace in Kosovo, if Serbs and Kosovars will live together, it will only happen through the mystery of forgiveness.

I kneel down and give him my weakness and failure, all my imperfection. I receive forgiveness, I get up and I can fly.

I personally need tons of that mystery. And I experience that the more forgiveness I receive, the longer I can fly.

If I cannot forgive others, if I am myself not forgiven, if I cannot forgive myself, I become evil. The only thing strong enough to break this vicious circle of evil is forgiveness.

I said that I need to kneel down at the roots of my life. The roots of my life, friends, are not Christian traditions or Christian values. The root of my life is Christ.

In his forgiveness I am brought from death to life, from imperfection to beauty, from fear to love.

When I am connected with my roots, I can fly. This is the mystery.

When the YMCA of Europe is looking into the future to decide on a roadmap, we as an organisation need to go through the same mystery, I believe, the same exercise.

And we need to connect with the same root, I believe - Christ.

In this way we can be free of the past and look with fresh eyes on new challenges. We become ready to strategize.

We are not a church and I want no fundamentalist aggressiveness. I just need strength from that kitchen stove where the love of God is burning and giving life to the future.

Organisations are alive, if the Blue Music can be heard. I believe that the Blue Music comes from the roots and go through the grey structures of our organisation and breaks through the roof and you can hear it in the laughter of children and you can see how smiles are born in old faces no longer afraid and you can smell it in the flowers on the apple tree or from the freshly made bread in the window of somebody's kitchen. The Blue Music is God's voice in a modern world. In Pristine the Blue Music sounds like a bus and smells a little of diesel.

My message is simple - let us collectively go through the mystery of kneeling at our roots, receiving forgiveness for our imperfection and let us get up and fly into new visions, free to change and inspired to serve. If we are afraid, we become conservatives, continuing to do what we did yesterday. If there is no fear, we are free to change, modernise and find new ways - a roadmap for the future. I really challenge you to talk about this in groups afterwards. What does it mean for EAY to kneel at its roots?

III. ROOTS AS ACHIEVEMENTS

Roots are also our achievements in life, good and bad.

So, before we look into the future, what have we achieved as EAY? What strength and tools do we have, that we can use to give life to the future?

1. VISIONS

We have the visions and strategic plans of people leading this organisation before us, and we shall build upon that as we develop the next EAY Role and Strategy, this is part of our roots.

2. 20 NEW NATIONAL YMCA MOVEMENTS

We have 20 new National Movements of YMCA since 1990. They are alive and growing, and they are becoming slowly integrated in the European family of YMCAs. This process of integrating 20 new YMCAs is becoming a process of change for all of us, of which we do not see all the consequences. It has the potential to change the way we exist together. I will come back to that. But I think all of us realize how much richer we have become. One example only: EAY used to be seen as a northern based, predominantly protestant organisation. The depths of the changes in the European YMCA dawned on me a few weeks ago when Tom Cusens, the new leader of COG, the Christian Orientation Group of EAY, called me from Malta and said: "We have plenty of Catholics from the South and Orthodox from the East in COG now. Can you please help us to find maybe only one Protestant from the North?" And he added: "And please bring a guitar!" Is that a protestant instrument, Tom?

3. EAY TRAINING CENTRE

We have a Training Centre here in Litomyšl. We used to have Schloss Mainau in Lake Constant up to 1968. This was because of, and now you will see me struggle as a Norwegian: great generosity from Sweden! When they took it back, EAY was given a substantial sum of money as compensation. This money is still in our accounts as the working capital of EAY, the untouchable money. Now we have a Training Centre again, with the potential of becoming the home and identity of YMCA Europe, and the working capital was not spent for it. In fact only a small part of YMCA money has been invested here. It started with Y'sMen Denmark, was helped by generous donations from USA and Norway, but the biggest part of investment here comes from the Czech Government, the City of Litomyšl and the European Union. We do not own it, but it is ours to use for the next 35 years, which can be prolonged, for no rent and with no debts. Let us use this tool for the future!

4. MEGA YOUTH FESTIVALS AS A NEW TOOL

We have Mega Youth Festivals as a new working tool in YMCA Europe. The Festival YMCA Europe 2003 is still alive and doing its good work around Europe. There are plenty of examples. YMCA Europe 2008 is already creating enthusiasm and energy, and it is in the work plans of all the Programme Groups. In the YMCA of the Netherlands they are already planning a Rally to Prague, and maybe we should widen this idea and make a Rally from all corners of the world to Prague. It has given a new dimension to our work. We have not gone crazy with the idea of massive festivals for their own sake. We have discovered that the concept of a massive Festival has its real importance in the process, and that it works both years before it happens as well as years after it happened. It is a tool to lead, inspire, serve and recreate YMCA Europe. It is a tool to deliver strategy. How shall we use it now and for the future?

VI. WINGS - HOW DO THEY LOOK?

1. INFORMATION NETWORK OR WORKING FELLOWSHIP

Well, when I look out of the windows of EAY, I realise that EAY is not an airplane, it is not even a bus, Blue or Grey, EAY is an umbrella, just like the black ones you see in the London Tube! An umbrella is not designed to fly, even if it sometimes happens, when the wind is too strong. An umbrella is designed to be a shelter against rain, a meeting place where we can talk together while waiting for the rain to stop. When rain stops, we fold the umbrella and we continue to do what we planned to do before it started to rain.

The question we should consider until next years assembly, is if it has really stopped raining? Please - a full year to discuss the weather? Yes, because we have been an umbrella for 32 years now, a change would be dramatic.

Should we fold the umbrella and buy wings so that we can really fly?

Under the umbrella we share information. Under the umbrella there is an information network. As I can understand, this is how the EAY was set up in 1973

In a plane we go places. It is a travelling fellowship, and if we go places to achieve important things together, it becomes a working fellowship.

I promised to come back to the potential for change for all of us, brought to us by the 20 new YMCAs in the East. They never experienced EAY as an umbrella. They experienced EAY as a facilitator for international projects, affecting them. It has been, and is, a working fellowship. As they become more integrated, they bring expectations to the fellowship that we all should be like that. A big, European working fellowship, with wings so that we can fly together.

2. SELF SUSTAINED YMCAs

When the Berlin Wall fell, EAY got a new marching order, for that part of Europe only: Go and do BEGLEITUNG. Be a working fellowship and develop 20 National Movements. We did that, all of us together, we still do, and it is an inspiring, exciting experience. The goal is to see the new movements becoming self sustained. Strengthening the Movement. I am not far from the truth if I say that the Global Operating Plan of the world movement has been shaped based on experiences from Eastern Europe.

The intriguing question is about sustainability all over Europe. Almost all National Movements are struggling more this year than last. Is sustainability, the strength to survive, on principle level different in Russia and Scotland? Bulgaria and Germany?

Should we give EAY the same marching order for Western European YMCAs as for Eastern? A facilitator for sustainability all over Europe?

In the Netherlands they work with neighbour countries to introduce a new profile of YMCA in bigger cities, to set up YMCA hostels, for instance. Housing programmes. They ask for a more proactive European coordination.

Stephen from Ireland asked me a couple of years ago what position there is for the medium size National Movements - too small maybe to offer a lot of support, but also too big to receive much support.

EAY is not only there for Eastern Europe - but the marching orders we take from you!

3. A STRONGER VOICE

Do we need to put our strengths together to compensate for the weaknesses? Do we need a more recognisable profile together to be able to compete with other organisations for funding? Does the changing political situation in Europe demand a stronger voice from us when we talk to the European Union and Council of Europe?

We are not talking power games here. The biggest strength of the EAY is its lack of formal power. We are only strong as long as we are relevant. That is healthy and should not change.

The wings of the EAY shall never be wings of power. No empire, no kingdom. It is only about working fellowship and profile.

4. MODERNISED – STILL BOTTOM UP

How shall the wings look?

We are happily decentralised and this effective and money saving structure shall be kept. It is grey and good.

Let the expertise and the resources stay where they are, scattered around in this resourceful YMCA movement in Europe. I see no top-down power base in Prague. This is and will always remain a bottom-up organisation, and we are proud of it.

But I think that we need to invest a lot of grey music to create a more modern and relevant way to work together in Europe. We may have to fold the umbrella and buy some wings.

After the Festival in Prague the leader of a very strong local YMCA approached me and said: "We need to find a way for us to work together with EAY on international projects. We are strong and we feel an obligation to do so!"

How can we modernise life so that Local, National and Area levels can work better together and so that we can use the few resources in more effective ways?

Three senior YMCA staff members, local, regional and National, have asked for a meeting with me in Prague in June to discuss how they can make some of their time available for international work.

We all get a lot of challenges and requests for support. More and more I hear the answer: Sorry, but we are too weak in our own situation. If that is the reality, that we struggle so much alone, maybe we should find a way to come together and become stronger together?

Is there a real lesson to be learnt from Eastern Europe on how we go together to survive?

What modern, grey structure of YMCA Europe will enable us tomorrow to play the Blue music better?

This brings me to the last question today.

V. WINGS – WHERE WILL THEY TAKE US?

If we have created wings, where will they take us? How does a roadmap for the future of EAY look? First let us have a look at the world surrounding us.

1. REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

Peter has opened many doors for EAY in England these days. The English National Secretary, Kevin, had a meeting with representatives of the English Government. He invited me to come along and discuss the challenge of young asylum seekers and their difficult situation. This is a many faceted challenge in almost all countries of Europe.

How can we as a collective come closer to such pan European challenges of our time? And by doing that, develop a profile which others can recognise?

Look at the screen and see one brilliant example from Armenia YMCA, the ICCO / EAY Refugee Integration Initiative for Armenia:

"Total budget: around 400,000 Euros, Timeframe: 2004 - 2006

Communities: 10 Refugee populated, remotely located rural communities in Armenia

Beneficiaries: more than 2,000 refugee families

Implemented by: all YMCA associations in Armenia

Main activities: Communities mobilization through the YMCA activities, community development activities based on communities' needs assessment, refugee children summer camp, TenSing reunions-festivals for refugee children and local YMCA TenSingers and others

Partner organizations involved in the project: EAY, YMCA Armenia, YMCA of the USA, HorYzon Switzerland - YMCA of Switzerland, YMCA of Germany, YMCA Netherlands, Government of Armenia."

We had an EAY Migrant Refugee and Asylum seekers Committee. There have been several discussions between a few movements in previous years on the same issue. The grey structure has not so far succeeded. Can we still allow ourselves to see this challenge as something for the especially interested only?

In the Council of Europe's study on "European Youth Trends" it is an example from Austria on the situation for young immigrants: "For Austrian society the combination of social disadvantage, urban ghetto life and discrimination due to foreign nationality is a social time bomb."

YMCA and John R. Mott got the Nobel Peace Prize in 1946 because that generation was able to grow with the challenges and became a world known agent to serve Prisoners of War. Some of you may know that our Egon came to the YMCA through that kind of programmes.

Are we able to grow with the challenges of our time? Will we be known as the organisation fighting for young refugees and their right to a decent life?

2. HIV/AIDS

A deadly serious threat to the lives of young people in the world to day is HIV-AIDS. The Global Operating Plan in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus is focused on this challenge. YMCA of the USA donates from their own YMCA budgets more than 150 000 dollars per year only to these three countries to help them do this at the same time as they strengthen their own YMCAs. Why is this not the flag over YMCA - we are the organisation fighting HIV-AIDS in Europe.

3. OUR ROLE IN THE GLOBAL VILLAGE

Living in the Global Village the European YMCA has not forgotten the responsibility for the developing world. But again the critical question is if we are properly organised to serve people and YMCAs outside of Europe? Each International YMCA-agency has a tendency to create its own small world with its own network of partnerships and therefore running the risk of duplicating efforts and reducing the effect of its investments. This lack of coordination also has as a result that the communication with ordinary YMCA-programmes "back home" is insufficient. The impact of the work on the ground and the profile in the public become weaker than what should be expected. After all there is a massive involvement of resources, people and wonderful visions. In spite of all that, the YMCA cannot compete with much smaller and narrower organisations.

This dividedness of the YMCA World Services is challenged these days by the Global Operating Plan. I do hope and believe that GOP will assist us in becoming better organised to serve the world. Then let us have a look internally of the YMCA.

4. PROGRAMME FIELD

I observe a stronger Programme Field than before. In a normal world the Programme Field is the everyday area of interaction between National Movements and Programmes. This implies that the Movement Development work will slowly be absorbed by the Programme Field. And in doing so become more relevant to our established Movements. This will be a gradual process, and I think Movement Development will have to stay as a priority area also for the next strategic period.

Still there are needs for more resources already now to prepare for this.

The question to you is: Do we need to establish the position of an EAY Programme Secretary? I will use only one example - Volunteers for Europe. A great potential could be released if we had the resources to run it professionally.

5. PUBLIC RELATIONS

Modern technology forces us to spend more resources on developing new and modern ways of communication and ways of presenting ourselves.

We need to invest more resources in the mastering of technology and "branding" and marketing ourselves in a competitive world of NGOs.

6. SPIRITUAL ROOTS AND INTER FAITH DIALOGUE

EAY Catch the Vision-events have focused on the Spiritual roots and dimension of the YMCA, while focusing on concrete areas of conflict and need. Eastern Europe, East-Jerusalem and Kosovo have been the venues so far. We need to intensify the focus on our Christian dimension to interpret it in the context of our time and times to come. The "YMCA Europe 2003" - festival gave an interesting and challenging platform to experiment with different ways of preaching the Gospel, of praying and living liturgies of different kinds and living and practicing our Faith. The Festival tuned out with the Manifesto, trying to set words to our visions as YMCA for the years to come. This work with interpretation of the Gospel for new generations and practicing of relevant forms of Services and liturgies must be intensified.

The scope must be what the Catch the Vision-events have given to us: Within a Culture of Peace we serve people of all faiths, trying to understand and respect people of all backgrounds as we are living and preaching our own Christian Faith. In this context Inter Faith dialogue will be a new area for EAY in the years to come. This is a concrete challenge all over Europe, and especially in countries like Albania, Kosovo, Turkey, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Azerbaijan. A new EAY Programme Secretary could facilitate this as well, together with COG at the same time as we seek guidance and advice especially from our friends in Africa and Asia.

St. Francis of Assisi: " Preach the Gospel; use words if you have to"

7. EAY TRAINING CENTRE

Of course we also need all your energy to develop the Training Centre into a fruitful tool for European YMCAs. The best way you can do that, is by using the centre for your own meetings.

IV. BLUE MUSIC CONTINUES TO LEAD US

Allow me to share with you a very warm memory from last year. That will lead me into a concluding vision for the future.

I am in a privileged position to travel this international YMCA movement a lot, and I know it probably better than many. Not many people know that Joaquim Gaspar from Portugal has a modern YMCA gas station in his YMCA to give jobs to the disabled! This year again I have met so many young people with stars in their eyes, all over Europe, a few weeks ago I heard amazing stories from young people at the English Assembly, one week later I was discussing with a wonderful group of able and good volunteers in the Netherlands. It really warms my heart. YMCA is changing lives every single day all over the continent.

I also travel outside of Europe to tell our stories and to ask for support.

Last June I was invited to speak to the Canadian National Assembly, and I had a wonderful visit there. I am really impressed with the quality of that YMCA. I spoke to them in the morning. Global Operating Plan, HIV/AIDS, Misha with tears in his eyes because he was so proud to become a staff member of EAY instead of becoming a general in the Red Army. Sasha who said: "I have worked 15 years for destruction - now I dedicate the rest of my life to the children of my country." I shared the Blue Music with them.

In that moment I was not an outsider and in that moment there was no distance between Canada and Europe. I realised that the Blue Music had hit a Canadian meeting and made us one. I remember I was also thinking - this is more than human work and achievement. It is again the Lord walking the earth, and his music is touching hearts and changing lives and sometimes he even makes us understand why we run YMCAs.

Dear friends - I believe we can fly. I believe we have wings. When I listen to the Blue Music, I see that we are called upon to take some serious decisions. In 15 years from now, and other people will lead the movement, we probably do not have a European Alliance of YMCAs, I think we will have YMCA Europe, and it will be more than a name change. I see no empire, but I see a better servant for the future needs in Europe and the world outside. It will take years to change, but I think this is the time to start to prepare for it.

This YMCA, sometimes you love it, sometimes it makes you crazy. Katie Melua sings about this, and today it is a love song to YMCA:

"And now I know
That there's a link between the two,
Being close to craziness
And being close to you"

Johan Vilhelm Eltvik