

# **"YMCA - ON THE GO FOR TOMORROW?!"**

## **EUROPEAN SECRETARY'S REPORT 1993/94**

**to the**

**EAY GENERAL ASSEMBLY, MAY 1994**

**(by Dölf Weder)**

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### **A) THE YMCA IN A CHANGING WORLD**

Dear Friends

Since 150 years, we have YMCAs in Europe. Since 150 years, the lives of thousands and thousands of young people have been deeply shaped and blessed by the YMCA. And since 150 years, young people have experienced in this YMCA the living reality of Christian love and faith, and have been called to get involved themselves in the extension of God's Kingdom among young people.

It is only with deepest thankfulness to our Lord and Saviour and to the thousands of committed YMCA leaders and members that we can look back on this blessed history of ours.

But there is also the other side:

Some 50 National Movements are identified by the World Alliance as movements in crisis. A fair number of them belong to the European Alliance.

We also find quite a number of YMCAs in Europe who only repeat the programmes they have always run. No innovation, no new programme ideas, no creativity. In several cases, membership is permanently shrinking, while a small group of YMCA leaders faithfully, but without vision, tries to keep it alive.

And we have to talk about those YMCAs who benefitted from the big money made available by social and political authorities. Now, the golden years have passed, and the European governments are cutting back social expenses. Those who cannot activate a committed membership are facing serious financial problems.

These problems within the YMCA are reflections of considerable change around us.

The YMCA likes to speak about change. But it seems we feel everybody has to change - except we, the YMCA.

Established institutions - and we are one of them - experience change mainly as a threat and not as a chance for something new.

In a changing world, new approaches and new programmes are needed, new ideas and new qualifications required, sometimes even new leadership. That threatens our present position.

But change is happening. And the speed of change is ever increasing.

If tomorrow the YMCA is the same as today, we tomorrow will be of yesterday.

"YMCA - on the Go for Tomorrow?" The theme of this General Assembly is formulated out of a certain concern:

Are we enough aware of the changing environment? Or are we simply repeating our traditional programmes?

Is what we are doing relevant for today's and tomorrow's young people? What is the YMCA's mission in today's and tomorrow's European realities?

Our rich history is no guarantee for a successful future. Our rich history is a starting capital for the future. Not more.

I here do not go into an analysis of the present changes in society. That is the task of tomorrow's Key-note Speaker.

Instead, and in the context of our world-wide mission review process, I want to point out five polarities, in which each YMCA has to position itself.

### **1. The YMCA as a Christian movement: Experienceable Reality - or Reference to History only?**

We here in Europe agree - at least on European and National level - that we want to be a Christian movement.

But this is not enough.

The word "Christian" is no longer a selling point when working with young people. In contrary.

For the majority of young Europeans Christian dogmatics are irrelevant, traditional Christian worshipping no longer meaningful, and they criticize the power structures of the established churches.

But our young people are very open for religion in a wide sense. They often discuss how to live a meaningful life. And they all want to experience life in its fullness.

It is, therefore, not enough to have some committed Christians in the YMCA boards and as General Secretaries, while all daily activities are led by any type of person who happens to have a certain competence in a programme field.

But on the other extreme, also attempts of religious indoctrination will be rejected.

If we want to be a credible Christian movement, then young people must be able to experience in our YMCA a different quality of life. Different from life in other, secular organisations.

Young people must experience God's love for them. God's love which becomes tangible in the love of leaders and of YMCA friends.

They must find people who talk with them about life, about its fundament, and how to make it a meaningful life.

And thirdly, these young people must be encouraged to become Jesus' disciples themselves and pass on God's love to other people.

Only this way, Christian life in the YMCA becomes an experienceable, credible reality - and not a reference to history only.

## **2. YMCA Members: Fellow Workers - or Consumers only?**

Our European statistics roughly show 2 1/2 million persons involved in some 7000 local YMCAs in Europe. We call them "members". Because we understand the YMCA as a membership movement.

John Valentine's Fitness Club, calls itself a club and its customers "members".

Is there any difference between a YMCA member and a John Valentine's Fitness Club member?

In our YMCA history, there has always been a big difference. And this difference is already expressed in the Paris Basis.

According to the Paris Basis, the YMCA first "seeks to unite young men"; seeks to bring them together, to integrate them into a group, to make them friends.

The second element in the Paris Basis is that these young people have or develop a "desire". They "desire" to be "His disciples in their faith and in their life". They start to live a new life, a life in love and faith.

And thirdly, the Paris Basis speaks about young men "associating their efforts for the extension of His Kingdom amongst young men".

With this third element, the young people, - who got united and who desire to live a life in love and faith - become active towards the outside. And this as a group, not as individuals only. They associate their efforts for the extension of God's new world among young people.

It is an organic process of coming together and going out; of going out and coming together.

It is the process successful YMCAs have always used.

The YMCA gathers young people and unites them in interaction. The YMCA changes young people and helps them to live a life in love and faith. And the YMCA sends these young people out to serve others, to work for God's new world.

This means that any young person who enters the door of a YMCA is not a consumer, and not a beneficiary of a social service only. Any young person who enters the door of a YMCA is a potential fellow worker, a worker for God's new world.

And any of these young people entering our doors bring with them a wealth of gifts, talents and creativity.

It is our task as YMCA leaders to encourage and allow these young people to serve other people with these, their gifts, talents and creativity.

This is the difference between a YMCA member and a member of John Valentine's Fitness Club: In the YMCA, a member is never a consumer or a social case only. Every, really every YMCA member is a fellow worker for the extension of God's new world and he or she has to be given a place to serve.

### **3. Young People in the YMCA: Youth Empowerment - or Youth carrying out Pre-Designed Activities only?**

This third polarity is closely linked to the understanding of YMCA membership.

If all YMCA members are fellow workers, or at least potential fellow workers, - and not customers and social cases only - then these young people must be the subjects of YMCA activity and not its objects only.

It means that adequate authority and power must be given to the young people to make themselves the decisions which concern them.

With other words: We must work for the empowerment of youth.

Today, within the YMCA, young people are complaining that they are not taken serious with their ideas. That power and control is kept and executed by a comparably small number of older, well established YMCA leaders. John Casey's recent article in "YMCA World" on this subject is most self-critical and challenging.

Older people do not need to be thrown out of the YMCA to give space to the youth. There must be a partnership of generations, where every age group brings in its special gifts and experience.

But it is by far not enough to add one or two alibi-youth to a well established board of management.

What we need in our YMCAs is the fundamental understanding that young people cannot only be seen as objects, as customers of well meant YMCA programmes; or as young leaders only carrying out programmes that others have designed for them.

This way, the whole creativity and imagination of these young people remains excluded from the YMCA. And even worse: Instead of developing critical, active citizens with a wide horizon, young people who are able to swim against the streams of society, such YMCAs train them to become obedient, well adapted youngsters, who, without questioning, nicely and quietly carry out what others tell them to do.

In a successful, true YMCA, the power to give shape to the different programme fields is decentralised and delegated. And the young people themselves are empowered and given the competence to make use of all their critical thinking, their creativity and their youthful enthusiasm.

Tomorrow's YMCAs must be sub-structured in sub-units, within which young people find enough freedom to develop their feeling of responsibility, their critical thinking, their creativity and their commitment.

Tomorrow's YMCAs must have "youth appeal". Youth appeal is created by young people for young people.

#### **4. Leadership: Systematic Leadership Development - Or Permanent Improvisation only?**

We can observe it throughout the world: The most critical success factor for YMCA work is its leadership. No success without systematic Leadership Development.

This is even more important if each member is considered a fellow worker. The gifts and talents need to be discovered and developed.

It is interesting that a lot of YMCAs still live without any systematic Leadership Development concept for their young volunteers - if such young volunteers exist at all...

And the development of professionals and board members in the majority of movements still is a matter of constant improvisation.

But any YMCA wanting to have a future cannot be without developing an adequate concept for systematic Leadership Development, ranging from young volunteers up to YMCA professionals and board members.

## **5. Programmes: Relevance and Creative Innovation - or Repetition of Tradition only?**

The problem of good and relevant YMCA programmes is that one day they are no longer good and relevant.

Because people and societies change.

We sometimes complain: The YMCA has been a pioneer in this and that. And now others are doing it, too. Often even better, because they specialise in this one thing.

It has always been the strength of the YMCA to analyze the actual needs of young people, and this in a global context. And to respond to these needs in a new, creative way, applying the holistic concept of body, mind and spirit in sound social interrelations.

We, therefore, often are the first in a new field; but we seldom remain the best in this field. Because we move on. We want to meet new needs, want to fill new gaps in provision.

YMCA work, therefore, is and must be in permanent change. YMCA work permanently needs critical self-analysis and sensitive social analysis. And then creativity and innovation to put the findings into relevant practice.

The problem starts when YMCAs only repeat once successful programmes. They then become method-oriented, instead of needs-oriented.

They ask: How can we bring more young people in our programmes? Instead of asking: What are the needs of today's young people and what must our programmes look like to meet these needs?

In today's world, the lifetime of a certain programme type is getting shorter and shorter, whereas to develop new programmes becomes more and more demanding.

Mutual sharing of ideas and creativity is an absolute must. And it has to happen across the borders of countries and even continents.

Isolated YMCAs will not survive.

We must learn from each other and develop new ideas and concepts in international, including global, dialogue and exchange.

I am deeply convinced that the YMCA has a great creative and innovative potential.

But innovation does not happen automatically. We must work for it, together, - on the go for tomorrow.

## **B) IS THE EAY ON THE GO FOR TOMORROW?**

In the second part of my presentation, I want to concentrate on the European Alliance. Are we on the Go for Tomorrow?

Looking back on the last five years, we can say without exaggeration that the EAY has gained a considerable dynamic.

And this not only because of some more European staff, but because we succeeded in better mobilising our National Movements and getting them involved in European work.

Today, laymen and professionals from all over Europe are active in some 20 EAY groups and committees, co-operating with each other, exchanging ideas, people and financial resources. Today's EAY is really relevant to quite a number of national movements and local YMCAs.

Negative is that some of our movements somehow missed the train. They remain in isolation, and this keeps them away from the stimulating effects of international co-operation. In several cases, it is also a symptom for a lack of vision on the side of their leadership.

My second concern is that we still do not sufficiently reach the local level.

It is not enough to produce financial resources for international work on national level, it is not enough to be represented in EAY working platforms and events, if what is happening on this level does not reach the local YMCAs.

We must strive for the involvement of the young people on local level, and for making European co-operation and exchange an experienceable, living reality for them. "Nothing is real until it is local".

### **Intermovement Cooperation**

This certainly is the field where most international interaction has developed over the past years.

With the end of the Saphir Initiative, we will be back on a more modest level in financial terms. Our Western and Southern European movements will not be able to produce more money than until now.

For some of our Central- and Eastern European YMCAs this means an hour of truth and maybe of financial crisis. More self-dependency will be required to survive. And non-financial support will become even more important: exchange of people, know-how and ideas.

This can only be achieved, if we considerably strengthen the involvement of our local YMCAs and of their young people. There are already some impressive examples for the positive effects of such grass-roots involvement.

Regarding EAY professional staff, we are extremely thankful that out of the three scenarios presented in my last year's report, it is not the worst-case scenario which became reality, but the middle one.

Financed by contributions of the YMCAs of Germany, USA and Norway, Johan Vilhelm Eltvik serves the EAY in a new capacity: as EAY Executive Secretary.

In this position, Johan Vilhelm acts as my right hand in the field, and this in the whole of Europe. He will concentrate on Leadership Development and YMCA Development work.

To Michael Wardlow, our Saphir Programme Executive, we have to say good-bye this summer for financial reasons.

He and Johan Vilhelm have done a tremendous job over the past three years. We warmly thank both of them for their most extraordinary work and commitment.

Our thanks also go to the YMCA of the United States, especially to Dale Vonderau and Bruce Knox of the Office for Europe and to the staff of the International Division in Chicago. We hope this partnership will continue and will be fruitful in other fields, too.

With this year, a five-year period of IMC work comes to an end. The future will look differently. We will focus more on the whole of Europe and will promote even stronger all kinds of cooperation, and not financial support only.

The EAY Executive Committee has decided to work out a new IMC strategy for the years 1995 to 1997. Everybody is warmly invited to submit creative inputs into this process.

### **European Programme Field**

Our EAY events reached last year a new record: More than 1'000 participants, most of them young people, and a bit more than 50% female. The great highlight was the first European Ten Sing Festival.

The new Programme Group "EMRAS", dealing with questions of Migrants, Refugees and Asylum Seekers has successfully started its activities.

A new Programme Group for YMCA Scouting and Jungschar is under discussion, and will hopefully come into formal existence during this Assembly.

The "Interpoint" programme is facing a difficult time. National movements must decide these days whether they are still interested in a European scheme. With only a few movements really

committed, such a European network cannot be maintained - and certainly not be extended.

### **Christian Orientation and Leadership Development**

In Christian Orientation, a lot has been achieved during the past years. Besides the annual Christian Orientation Workshops, since last year a new "C"-Workshop takes place, gathering young leaders in the age of 18 to 22 years.

Wille Riekkinen has resigned from his responsibility as a Vice-President of the EAY and member of the Executive. We would like to warmly thank him for the spiritual leadership he has given us during many years.

In the field of Leadership Development, the EAY has taken important steps last year with the implementation of the In-Service Training scheme, the introduction of "Training the Trainers" courses, and the new employment of Johan Vilhelm Eltvik.

Now a comprehensive strategy becomes necessary, covering all Leadership Development activities already carried out or still needed. Again, all good ideas and suggestions are very welcome.

### **EAY Representation**

The EAY has a group of good junior- and senior-representatives and a very active chief-representative at work. This results in a clear profile of the YMCA in international bodies.

During the past years, the need has developed to re-define the role of the EAY in the Global Dialogue and in YMCA Inter-Area Cooperation. A Work Group and the Plenary of this Assembly will deal with this challenge.

National movements are also invited to come up with nominations for further young people under 30 who can be introduced into the work of an EAY representative.

### **Communication and Finances**

The new EAY Communication concept is not yet fully in place. But we are working on it, and several brochures are in print. The gaps should be closed during this year.

Nick Bibiris, leader of EAY Communication, has resigned and is leaving the EAY Executive Committee with this Assembly. We thank him for the ideas he has put into this work.

EAY Finances are in a balanced situation due to a careful finance policy and a strict monitoring of accounts. However, a lot of efforts are required in the coming years to cope with the consequences of the actual volume of EAY work. It is only with the good will of all National Movements that we shall be able to retain the financial balance also in the coming years. A new formula for National Contributions, based on statistical facts, is absolutely necessary. The presently applied EAY fees have become more and more unfair. Unfortunately, it seems unlikely that the idea of an EAY Travel Fund can be realized in the near future.

### **Youth and Programme Exchange**

Finally, I would like to mention this youngest EAY Working Field.

With special support of the Danish, Norwegian and Swiss YMCAs, three programmes have been launched and are gaining speed:

- "Volunteers for Europe", dealing with exchanges of - mainly young - volunteers from 1 to 12 months,
- "Professionals for Europe", dealing with exchanges of YMCA employees of any kind, and
- "Friends for Europe", a network of local YMCAs being specially interested in international cooperation.

A big challenge is the difficult recruiting of Hosting YMCAs. It is a crazy situation that we have a high number of experienced young people who are ready to serve for almost nothing, but few YMCAs only who want to make use of them.

What we need in this field, too, are strong commitment and creative ideas. The schemes are not just another EAY activity, but a most important element in our strategy to give fresh dynamic to European co-operation, and make it relevant and visible on local level.

### **Thanks**

Coming to the end of my report, I would like to thank all the many laymen and professionals who in various capacities make this Europe of the YMCAs a living and relevant reality. Warm thanks to all of you for your vision, co-operation and great commitment!

A special thank goes to the Asian YMCAs who hosted me during my recent study trip. They greatly helped me to see sharper many of the points I mentioned in this report. I hope that Inter-Area Dialogue and Inter-Area Cooperation will be considerably strengthened during the coming years.

## **YMCA - On the Go for Tomorrow?!**

Is the YMCA now on the Go for Tomorrow?

With our rich history and many great achievements, we certainly have a good starting position.

But repeating traditional programmes is not enough. There must be a dynamic of permanent, relevant innovation. The creative potential of young people, members and leaders must be fully used and developed. And we must be clear about our Christian identity and mission in today's and tomorrow's European realities.

Let us, therefore, work together and strengthen each other.

Our world needs a relevant YMCA. The youth of Europe needs a relevant YMCA.

A YMCA on the Go for Tomorrow!

St. Gallen, 6 May 1993 Dölf Weder