

"EAY - CREATING SPACE FOR YOUNG ADULTS"

EUROPEAN SECRETARY'S REPORT 1994/95

to the

EAY GENERAL ASSEMBLY, MAY 1995

(By Dölf Weder)

I.

A. Young Adults need space

Dear Friends

Have you ever been in the Sahara? Have you ever experienced one of the great deserts of this world?

I had the chance some ten years ago. In a small group, we moved through the southern Sahara for four weeks. We were riding camels and walking on foot. We slept under the open sky. We ate sheep and dried date and drank water out of big water sacks, made of the skins of whole goats.

I will never forget these days and nights; these enormous dimensions and distances; this touch of endless space and eternity.

I remember the day, when we got up early in the morning and saw an impressive mountain in the far and hazy distance at the other end of an enormous flat plateau.

We walked all day over this hot and stony plain, till we - with the last sunshine - could roll out our sleeping-bags at the foot of the mountain.

I remember the shining night when I was lying on my back in the midst of the endless sand, arms and legs stretched out towards the ends of the world. Over me a dark-blue velvet sky and precious golden stars.

And I understood what this is: space, endless space. Liberation from all the limitations and restrictions of life. Free and deep breathing. Life reduced to the essential and elementary. And above all, and in all, God, our Lord.

I understood that I need space, open space.

And that's why I understand when I get these greeting cards from all over the world, sent by my former YMCA leaders and campers, mostly young people in the age of 18 to 30. We call them Young Adults.

These young people have crossed the borders of their teenage life. They are discovering new worlds, new spaces.

New worlds and new spaces in geographical terms: With little money in their pockets, they travel to foreign countries. They discover the endless plains of Australia, they work in the slums of the Philippines, they are fascinated by the grand cities and National Parks in the States, they take sun-baths on the glittering beaches of Greece, and they love the romantic pubs in Ireland.

My grand-father came from a simple family. He was not even allowed to learn a profession. And he certainly didn't have money to travel to Australia. But already he - like many young Swiss at that time -, he packed his rucksack and went for two or three years to Germany and France - on foot.

He worked where he could find work. He crossed the borders of his teenage life. He discovered new worlds and spaces.

But when Young Adults cross the borders of their teenage life, they don't do it in a geographical respect only. They accept the responsibility for their lives.

They leave the comfort of their teenage roles and convictions. They leave the value system of their parents and teachers. They experiment with new roles and values. They develop their own lives.

And that's why Young Adults need space, open space.

It's the time when they decide on the direction of their future professional life.

It's the time when they are in love and engage themselves in partnership and family.

And it's also the time when they find or loose new faith and spirituality.

Young Adults need space, - and not play-grounds controlled by the adult establishment.

Young Adults do not want to play games any more. They want to do real things. They want to shape open spaces. They want to create and influence life, real life.

It's the age when you believe you can change the world. And it's the age when you do it.

It's living full of dreams and visions. And it's suffering under desperation and the problems of the world.

It's making your own decisions. And it's learning to live with the consequences of your decisions.

It's falling in love. And it's experiencing to become vulnerable and to be hurt when loving.

All this means to give up a lot of protection and security. It often means to live a simpler and more vulnerable life. But it's discovering a new world and conquering new spaces. Your own world, your own space, your own role, your own love, your own faith and spirituality.

It's finding yourself - and hopefully God.

Even the Young Adult Jesus went out to the open space of the desert before he started the work of his life.

B. Open space leads to deep human encounter and friendship

Going out to new open spaces leads to deep human encounter and friendship.

I learnt this in another, an earlier year, in another desert: in the Thar Desert, the huge land on the border between India and Pakistan.

We, a small group of young Swiss together with an equal number of local young Indians, were riding through the Thar Desert. We came through regions where Westerners are seen only seldom.

We were always two on one camel, an Indian and a Swiss.

The partner I was given was Bhuraram, a young Muslim. Communication was a real problem. Bhuraram spoke only Hindi; I didn't. We needed Boannis, Bhuraram's friend, a Hindu. With his limited English, he helped us to communicate. But on our camel, there was no Boannis.

And we were riding for days on this same one animal, on the same wooden saddle, body by body. Communication? Yes. - But in various kinds of languages.

The endless open space of the desert, and the harmony of elementary life in the middle of no-where makes you open for new and deep human encounter.

During these days, I experienced one of the most special friendships I have experienced in my life. A friendship between 3 young men from 3 different religions, coming from two totally different cultures and societies, and having difficulties to even understand each other, - but sitting for many days on the same camel, on the same wooden saddle.

At the end of these weeks, we had to say good-bye. For ever, we knew it. We had tears in our eyes. And we have never seen us again. My friends' photographs are still hanging in my dining room. And sometimes I think back to the times in the Thar Desert. Where open space creates deep human encounter and unusual friendship.

You may say, this is emotional and sentimental. Of course it is. But I think there is a lot of general human experience and truth in it.

It is what our Young Adults experience when they go out to the open spaces of this world. When they open up for human encounter. It creates new life perspectives and leads to friendship and deep understanding.

I could also say it in bigger words: It creates more peace, justice and understanding in our world: the YMCA's mission.

C. The international YMCA has always created space for Young Adults

When we as EAY say we want to create space for Young Adults, then we want to facilitate this kind of experience. It changes and deeply enriches people, and it changes and deeply enriches the world, - the YMCA world, too.

It was Young Adults who spread the idea of the YMCA throughout Europe and the USA in few years after 1844 and 1855.

The idea of the YMCA gave these young people the space to put into practice their dreams and visions for the World.

It was then Young Adults again, who in the last years of the 19th century, left in considerable numbers their homes to work as Fraternal Secretaries in so called "missionary" countries.

Today we have mixed feelings about that undertaking. It was the time when the North and West "knew", and the people of the South and East should learn.

We today have another approach in the EAY, the *Begleitungs*-approach.

We don't believe that one side "knows" and the other must learn. We want to walk side by side, giving and receiving. We want to share with each other our visions, our lives and our talents.

Or to say it with my earlier picture of the Thar Desert: We want to ride together through the spaces of this world, - on one and the same camel, on one and the same saddle.

This shaping of new spaces did not happen in history only. Today again, Young Adults spread the Ten Sing idea throughout Europe and the world. Already several hundred of them have given weeks or even years of their life to go to another country to share the Ten Sing vision with new friends abroad.

Other examples are dynamic local YMCAs, like the YMCA of Gdynia here in Poland: Almost entirely developed and run by Young Adults.

What did the YMCA do in all these cases? Very little. Very little! - But the most important:

The YMCA saw the enormous potential of all these young people. And the YMCA dared to give space to them, open space to go out to dream, and to put their dreams and visions into practice.

But don't let us be naive: To give space to young people means to give space to change. And change is dangerous for our present positions and even for our present YMCA profile. If we are afraid of change we better don't give space to young people.

When we are talking about the EAY creating space for Young Adults, we are not talking about creating another programme for Young Adults. We are talking about opening up international spaces, free and open spaces, so that Young Adults can use their enormous potential to dream and to put their dreams and visions into practice.

II.

D. **5 Theses on Young Adults' involvement on EAY level**

Dear Friends With these more fundamental thoughts, I wanted to make us aware of the wider dimension of our Assembly theme.

It is the role of our Discussion Group process, opened by the Youth Inputs of yesterday, to analyze the special situation on EAY level and to come up with proposals for practical action steps.

I would nevertheless like to put before you five - a bit provocative - theses covering five aspects that seem important to me when discussing the role of Young Adults on EAY level.

Thesis Number 1:

Our National Movements need a new awareness of the Young Adults' potential for international YMCA work and of the blockages preventing them from getting involved.

Behind this thesis stands my firm conviction that we presently by far do not make adequate use of the enormous potential of our Young Adults for international YMCA work.

The problem are various blockages within our present structure and system.

To create an awareness of this potential and to self-critically analyze the blockages are important tasks of this Assembly.

Thesis Number 2:

International YMCA work is one of the most attractive fields of involvement for Young Adults.

The rationale for this thesis should be obvious from what I said in the first part of my report.

Quite a number of our National Movements have committees at work who discuss how to keep Young Adults in the YMCA. I suggest as a major answer: Get them actively involved in international YMCA work!

Thesis Number 3:

When intending to involve Young Adults in international work, we have to answer two main questions:

a) What places and spaces can we offer Young Adults from abroad?

b) What can our Young Adults do abroad?

Mutual giving and receiving is only possible if we welcome as many young people from abroad as we are sending abroad, and vice versa.

We are not talking about long-term commitments only. What we need is a wide range of different types of possible involvement.

Thesis Number 4:

We have to move from a static thinking in traditional YMCA structures to a dynamic and interactive network approach.

Our traditional YMCA structures have enormous communication distances from a local member, over the local association, to a region, then to the National Movement and finally to the EAY and its groups.

The flow of information is too slow or does not work at all.

Free-of-charge EAY brochures do not even reach the letter boxes of more than half of our local associations. How should these members then reach us?

A lot of young YMCA members who know about this situation, complain heavily. And we complain, too.

We do not have to destroy the traditional structures or to bypass anybody. But we have to set up more dynamic and interactive networks with direct access to information and communication. Adequate use of new electronic technology will help us to achieve this.

Thesis Number 5:

We need a Youth Mobilisation Group on European level and a European youth network.

I'm against Youth Committees. We need our young people in all our committees.

But I dream of a group of Young Adults whose responsibility it will be · to establish a network of young people from all over Europe, · to stay in communication with them, · and to mobilise them for specific tasks and roles.

This Group will provide us with proposals about what can be done by their young people.

And this Group will be approached by us whenever we see tasks, opportunities or open spaces for young people.

Friends, I have written these 5 theses before knowing the content of yesterday's Youth Inputs or the outcome of your Group Discussions. They may now be cold coffee of before-yesterday for you.

But please still take them, as an input from a European staff perspective

E. The EAY in the year 1994/95

As every year, I want to give you in the last part of my report an overview of some major developments in the EAY during the past year.

Intermovement Cooperation (IMC)

In most parts of Eastern Central Europe we today have well re-established YMCA movements with clear own identities.

Of course, these movements are still facing severe problems and will continue to need substantial support and development. But not few of them are today out-performing many Western European YMCAs.

These days, a new group of countries is entering centre-stage.

It's the countries of Eastern Europe. In front of all Russia, but also the Ukraine, Belarus, and of course our old friends Armenia and Georgia.

Especially the YMCAs of the USA and of Sweden have done an exciting job over the past years. Today we count between 20 and 30 local YMCAs in this region. Several of them are represented at this Assembly. The Russian YMCAs are gradually moving towards the establishment of a National Movement. In Armenia, we already have such.

Our most eastern association is presently the YMCA of Novosibirsk in Siberia. Novosibirsk is situated north of New Delhi!

Russia is an enormous field. So far, we have only touched a few sand-corns of a huge sand beach.

Joe Wootten, US Field Worker for the NIS, continues to work from Moscow for these YMCAs. He and his friends do it in the spirit of good cooperation with the European and the World Alliance.

At its meeting of last October, the EAY Executive Committee made Russia a high priority area.

Only: making something a high priority and real action are two quite different things. The EAY can only do what its National Movements are ready and able to do. We need the contribution of all of you to meet these new challenges!

EAY Field Staff

It meant a special joy for us when we per 1st January got the money to employ Michal Sourek, former National Programme Secretary of the Czech YMCA.

Michal works as EAY Development Secretary. His brief includes YMCA Development Work in the Ukraine and Leadership Development in close cooperation with Johan Vilhelm Eltvik.

The appointment of Michal Sourek marks another mile-stone in the history of the European Alliance. For the first time, a professional from Eastern Central Europe has been appointed to serve as EAY staff. We hope we will soon be able to welcome further qualified Central and Eastern European professionals in our crew.

A special new commitment of a local German initiative group has enabled the EAY Executive Committee to establish a second EAY Development Secretary post per autumn 1995.

The priority of this new position will be Russia with emphasis on Youth Leadership Development and a well integrated Christian Orientation.

The financial situation remains critical if we want to continue on the present level of EAY operations. Especially in a mid- and long-term perspective there are very substantial financial gaps to be filled. The EAY will need the continuing and increasing support of our National Movements.

Hope gives the new World Alliance Intermovement Support System IMSS. It is agreed that also the European YMCAs will benefit from the proceeds of the selling of the John R. Mott Building in Geneva.

In line with the outcome of the recent IMSS questionnaire and a following IMSS needs analysis meeting in Sofia, the EAY Executive Committee has decided to use such support for the continuation of the important EAY Begleitungs-Work and related staff cost.

This means that all National Movements from all over Europe will be able to benefit from this new World Alliance support system if they wish to do so.

New "Directions for EAY IMC Work"

As you are certainly aware all these steps cannot be taken without a clear strategic planning, without careful analysis of where we are, where we want to go and how we can reach our goals.

For this purpose the EAY Executive Committee in October of last year adopted an additional strategy paper with the title

"Directions for EAY IMC Work - A Reference Document for EAY Operational Groups".

You find a copy in your General Assembly Working Documents, white pages 79 to 84.

The idea is that all Field Groups and EAY Programme Groups carefully analyze the document and discuss how they can contribute to the goals and tasks outlined in that document.

The Executive Committee is convinced that we can do meaningful IMC work only in a joint effort of all.

What we need in Europe is *dynamic interaction* of all YMCAs. And this from National Movements down to the grassroots level.

The document, therefore, formulates as General Direction for IMC work in the Mid-90s:

"To foster and further encourage a dynamic interaction of all European YMCAs."

The need for more interaction is also one of the reasons for the theme of this General Assembly.

We believe that our Young Adults can be most important elements and catalyst of such intensified dynamic interaction in Europe.

Leadership Development

In carrying out what the "Directions for EAY IMC Work" say about Leadership Development, an intensive process has been launched to develop a comprehensive EAY Leadership Development concept. The European YMCA Schools as well as key leadership trainers from East and West have been involved in this process.

The concept is now born and has been adopted by the EAY Executive Committee at its meeting of last March.

You find the interesting paper in your General Assembly Working Documents under the title "*New Directions for EAY Leadership/Movement Development*" (white pages 97 to 120).

The concept bases on the assumption that Leadership Development and YMCA Movement Development are closely linked to each other.

It further more does not want to duplicate what in our European YMCAs is already done on various levels and for various target groups.

The EAY, therefore, decided to choose a *modular approach*. A modular approach, in which various and different existing modules, but also complementary new modules, will be combined to flexible curriculums and portfolios.

The coordinating nerve centre of this will be a small EAY Leadership/Movement Development Service.

A grant application has been made to the European Union, requesting support for EAY staffing and infrastructure to carry out this forward leading concept.

During this Assembly, the Work Group on "Leadership Development" will deal in detail with the new concept. It will also again be a major agenda item at the National General Secretaries' Conference.

Christian Orientation

In Christian Orientation, a new process has started, too.

Following a decision of the EAY Executive Committee in last October, a group, consisting of mainly younger persons from various confessional and cultural backgrounds, has been composed.

Their task is to analyze the current situation in Europe regarding various forms of youth spirituality and to say and do something about the role of the YMCA in the midst of today's dramatic religious changes.

The new Christian Orientation Group works under the leadership of Eilert Rostrup from Norway and is also responsible for the spiritual parts of this Assembly.

European Programme Field

The European Programme Field is looking back on another successful year. The statistics show that almost 1'200 participants from 26 European countries have made use of EAY programmes during the past year. Highlight was of course the International European Youth Event taking place parallel to the YMCA World Council.

A new Programme Group, the "European Scouts and Jungschar Group (ESG)", has now been officially founded. We were hoping for this to happen since many years. Welcome in the EAY family!

Youth and Programme Exchange

The programme "Volunteers for Europe" placed 22 volunteers last year. The evaluations are positive in most respects.

Although sometimes attacked because of cost, the Introduction- and Mid-Term Courses prove to be key elements for successful placements.

The exchange of Interpoint volunteers is now handled by "Volunteers for Europe", too. This because the Interpoint Group and the half-time position of an Interpoint Coordinator have been given up last autumn.

"Volunteers for Europe" Applications for this year show a further increasing readiness of YMCA Young Adults to go abroad and serve in a foreign YMCA.

However, it is a real tragedy that our more than 7000 local YMCAs and their movements do not seem to be ready or to be financially in the position to make use of these young people.

We have to ask ourselves to what extent we can afford to mobilise good-willing young volunteers when we afterwards have to disappoint them because only few YMCAs want or can use them.

One argument sometimes used against the "Volunteers for Europe" scheme was the administrative fees to be paid to the EAY. In view of these criticisms, the EAY Executive Committee finally decided at its meeting in March that no administrative fees will be charged any more as from 1st January 1996. For 1995, we still have the rather flexible flat-rate system.

For us in the European staff, it is very apparent that our Young Adults can be mobilised and are ready to serve in various roles.

But our critical question is whether the European YMCAs are really ready and able to create space for our Young Adults.

We will give a verbal answer with the outcome of this Assembly.

But we will give the real answer by our actions and deeds during the months to come.

The European Office

Let me finally say some few words about the situation in the European Office in St. Gallen.

As you know we have some sad and difficult months behind us. And I here want to again warmly thank all of you who made us really feel that we are a family also in difficult times.

The present situation is that Christoph Hostettler has left us to assume major responsibility in the local YMCA of St. Gallen. We are thankful that he can be with us again during this Assembly.

Regula Ruch-Leumann is happy and busy with young Christian, her recently born boy. She will be on maternity leave till end of August, and will then assume a reduced 50% responsibility as my Personal Assistant. Regula will mainly deal with issues needing advanced YMCA knowledge.

With Matthias Harte as new 100% Office Assistant things did not work out as we had hoped. He left in the middle of April.

But we found Nicole Hofstetter. Nicole is with us already here at the General Assembly. She comes from outside the YMCA, but brings a lot of talents to the EAY,

The other 50% will be covered by Daniel Kempter. He is 33 years of age and will start work on 1st July. Daniel's main emphasis will be on financial matters.

And, of course, I do not want to forget our old friend Susi Hurschler. Susi will continue to support all of us in the office with a 20% employment for support services.

IV.

F. Thanks and Conclusion

Coming to the end of my report, I would like to sincerely thank all of you who helped to make 1994 another dynamic and fruitful year for the EAY and our European movements. The enormously wide span of EAY activities is only possible because of the committed work of so many volunteers and professionals from all over Europe and from our partners overseas.

In our new IMC Directions, we say that we still have to come to more dynamic interaction between all of us.

We must change our thinking from a static thinking in traditional YMCA structures to a dynamic, interactive network approach. A thinking which deals with people and with faces. A thinking and acting which mobilises our members and brings them into dynamic interaction.

The one big treasure the YMCA has, are our young people. The young people represent our mission and our potential.

We presently do not make full use of this potential. Structures and manifold blockages paralyse their dreams and visions. We, therefore, often loose them.

Friends, the aim of this General Assembly 1995 is to create new space for Young Adults in the EAY.

Open space to be shaped, Open space to be filled with dreams, visions and action.
Open Space for love and friendship.

We have the potential to do it!

God may help us. God may bless us.

Thank you!