

Honorary Council meeting

12th – 14th October 2015, Český Těšín

Introductions

The meeting gathered the representatives of member organisations from 12 countries. They came together in order to share their reflections on recent developments in their context and their individual organisations as well as about the recent activities of interdiac. This group which represents the network of interdiac aims to inform, guide and support interdiac activities in the region.

As previous practice has shown, the findings from sharing increase an understanding of “realities” in rapidly changing contexts. At the same time getting such complex picture with the views of both internal & external processes, on organisational & wider societal level and personal concerns, can be a solid ground on which to develop some joint actions.

According to the expertise from the academic field and working contexts, the practitioners and teachers contributed to the further development of the learning process of the second & third semester of the new Double Degree Programme. Alongside this, the learning needs for one semester study programmes and other ideas for further development in the future were discussed.

The practice of conviviality as a core concept of diaconia has been shared from several living contexts of partner organisations, in a lively session during the event of Honorary Council meeting.

The “journey” from the previous meeting in October 2014 was an invitation to think of the motivational aspects of being involved in diaconal and social activities with people in need, the developments in societies & their personal and institutional impacts and much needed support in order to continue with the work.

Responses through the eyes of participants, in terms of motivational aspects:

- Preaching by action
- Working with people
- Spreading Good News
- Motivate others
- Response to God’s call
- “Use” education and build career
- Engage people and let them to realize their vision
- Listen to people and let them “lead me” (meaning a diaconia worker)
- Response to the needs of society and church
- Help and care for people


Developments in societies and their personal & institutional affects:

- Refugees from Middle East, Chechnya, Iraq
- Internally displaced people
- Effect of war in Syria
- Elections in Estonia and Serbia with certain level of instability revealed in both the context of EU member states and non-EU countries
- Organizational change of leadership position
- Struggles against system of corruption
- New divisions in societies due to different political point of views
- Manipulation with information in media
- Military attacks against the newcomers from different countries

New phenomena call for new actions in diaconia and Christian social practice through which the societies can become more sensitive towards the suffering of the people regardless of their national and religious background.

These new “trends” challenge the personal and professional developments of the organisations and workers, in order to widen the vision of how to support those who are in need. Advocacy should go along with the direct work with the people.

Needed support:

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- Volunteers
 - Education
 - Finances
 - Prayers
 - Common understanding

interdiac Activities

The journey undertaken through the interdiac activities since October 2014 till now made stops at Education & Training, Networking, Publication and Research, as they are considered to be the four main pillars of interdiac work.

Preparation for the operation of Double Degree Programme, including the main contents and process of the study programme, the partner institutions involved in the development and the delivery of programme itself since September 2015 have been introduced and discussed.

The joint LWF consultation process on re-forming community diaconia in Europe with the thematic focus this year on convivial economy with different views of the pan-European group, contributes to the reflection on the models of diaconia in practice.

Strengthening the ties between existing partner organisations & institutions and building new ones in the Eastern European region are considered to be essential steps towards networking on local, national and international level. Trustful relations channel the resources for educational programmes and in fact the developments of diaconal initiatives.

Learning material as one outcome of the joint learning actions multiplies the ideas for new practice. The Publication "Seeking conviviality..." already translated in 5 different languages and other interdiac publications are witness to this experience. Other interdiac publications, including the Diaconia Handbook are under the process of elaboration.

A thematic focus area of Research in field of diaconia in Middle and Eastern European context is lacking development. Evaluative research with contextual relevance will be the very first step in order to get a picture about the diaconia practice in relation to diverse regional & sub- regional and confessional contexts. In this respect some research projects related to the new degree programme may make a contribution.

Double Degree Programme

interdiac and its partner organisations in the region in conjunction with the partner universities, Diak in Finland and PTF, Charles university in Czech Republic have developed and this autumn launched the Double Degree Programme (DDP) with a focus on diaconia.

The ministries of Education, in Czech Republic and Finland, have accredited the programme as has the committee responsible for accrediting social work courses in the Czech Republic.

The first group of DDP students has been joined by 2 students of the one semester basic course in social, community and diaconal work starting in September 2015.

The group of students is very diverse and the learners come from a wide variety of denominational, cultural and professional backgrounds. All are involved in social services and diaconia as professionals or volunteers.

The programme is based on the experience of interdiac and its partner organisations and is divided in 5 contact teaching units in Český Těšín during the first semester. During the In-between period (between the contact teaching sessions) the students continue their practical engagement in their working places back home or in the Czech Republic. Their learning during the In-between period is supervised by the supervisors that have been appointed in their working places. Both the students and the supervisors are supervised by the interdiac Tutor and the Responsible Teacher.

Alongside this, the on – line learning platform "Fronter" and e-library are essential and very useful tools to support individual and group learning by accessing the books & the learning material, as having forum discussion with other students and responsible teacher.

Long-term procedures on visa arrangements for students and one lecturer are seen as a barrier which hinders involvement in face to face teaching units. In case of 3 students, the nostrification process is still under way.

So far, the 1st contact teaching in September and the 2nd contact teaching in October took place in Český Těšín, each being led by an international team of lecturers and experts.

Reflection on the learning process

The learning process of the degree programme is complex and leading teams are created for each contact teaching, who deliver the teaching with other visiting or on-line lecturers and

resource people. In-between the students have specific assignments which have to be completed in due time. The learning is based on a participatory process with strategic teaching inputs. So far, the students are very satisfied with the implementation of the programme, giving positive feedback about contents and methods. The main problems that have been faced have been related to the already mentioned Visa difficulties and related logistics. The involvement of the interdiac partners and network is critical to the success of the programme and each Honorary Council meeting focuses on the Operational Plans for two forthcoming semesters. In this case, the second and the third semesters. The Operational Plan was updated and suggestions for resources and the learning process made in the light of experience so far.

The idea of regional centres for international face to face meetings linked together using the on –line platform is seen to be a new possibility for contextual learning which will support the local development of resources and delivery of the Double Degree Programme.

Conviviality as a core concept for diaconia

interdiac has chosen to focus on conviviality as a key word and as experienced so far, it appears to be surprising one as well. The word “conviviality” is not so familiar in this context and it has not a single word equivalent in some national languages, as do for example community or human dignity.

Conviviality refers to the art and practice of living together. The word was first used in the contemporary context by Ivan Illich to refer to the idea of creative relationships between people and people and their environment. He contrasted conviviality, which he saw as a free give and take between people as they create their own reality, to the mechanical and conditioned responses to demands made on people by others with power. Nowadays, conviviality can be also used as an alternative concept to multiculturalism because conviviality refers to the everyday interactions and practices of living together across diversity and without domination.

The representatives from Latvia, Estonia and Ukraine shared their experience on how conviviality has been lived and perceived in their working contexts.

Being interested in others, openness to those who are different and sensitivity to those who suffer – this is what conviviality is about. It is not only about helping people, but about ‘how to help’ and also about promoting justice.

To become more familiar with “conviviality” means consciously using this term, the “Conviviality Day” can be celebrated in each church congregation, as proposed in Latvia. Praying and caring for others beyond the borders of one country can be another example of living conviviality.

Conviviality can also mean creating a new community church in order to meet the needs the people living on the spot. In order to present conviviality to different actors, from church, parishes, diaconal institutions, other NGOs, politicians to the wider public, the idea of “convivial market” can be chosen.

Good practice of a multi-sectoral approach in creating and promoting conviviality was shared from one context where events involving non – governmental and public sector organisations have been organised.

Introducing the concept of conviviality in the country marked by civil conflict or war and in highly individualistic societies may seem to be very challenging. On contrary, collections of clothes and medicine for the soldiers, home-made food brought personally to the wounded soldiers in the hospitals are some examples of art and practice of living together in Ukraine. It

can be stated, from the diverse experiences of interdiac, that conviviality is lived in everyday life on micro-level.

Conviviality is about the equal partnerships. The painful experience of the partnership like “hammer and nail” made by Ukrainian German Lutheran church with its long term partner church in Bavaria is exactly the opposite what conviviality as a diaconal concept is about.

Final word

Members of the Honorary Council committed themselves to supporting new and innovative approaches to diaconia founded in “conviviality”. Through sharing experience and knowledge and building relationships through the meeting of Honorary Council – has been a very enriching experience of living CONVIVIALITY.

The context we live now seems to be experiencing the building of new borders, visible and invisible. The hostility to people because of their “difference” or because of their need for social allowance due to (e.g.) disability are very strong warning signals of “tough time” which has to be addressed by diaconal actors effectively. There surely is a need to develop the tools for conviviality.

In light of the way power structures, worked, Honorary Council members also raised an essential question: “What can conviviality contribute to the institutional church, financial actors and powerful stakeholders which interfere in a dominating or oppressive way on local situations?” The challenge is to work out a strategy for conviviality relevant to the institutional life in church and society so that institutions are ‘convivial and support conviviality’!