“You shall be my witnesses”. Acts 1.8

In the beginning of June all the eyes of the ecumenical world were pointed to Novi Sad, where the Conference of European Churches held its last General Assembly under the theme “You shall be my witnesses” (Acts 1.8). Almost 400 people gathered in Novi Sad, Serbia from 31. May – 6th of June, they came from 34 different countries and contributed together at the outcomes of this Assembly.

By choosing to hold its Assembly in this place filled with history, CEC is emphasizing its pursuit for justice and reconciliation. CEC has 4 member churches in Serbia: The Serbian Orthodox Church, the Hungarian Reformed Church, the Slovak Evangelical Church of Augsburg Confession and finally the Methodist Church. These were the local churches that were invited to this Assembly and cooperated well with each other in order to make this Assembly happen.

The Conference of European Churches is a unique ecumenical platform on the European level. At its last Assembly in 2013 in Budapest, the Conference adopted a new constitution which was going to simplify the procedures and explain the different responsibilities. It also involved a move from Geneva to Brussels. The newly-elected Governing Board in Budapest has had a difficult task for the last 5 years, including not only implementing the changes enacted in Budapest, but also managing the organization during this transition period.

Everyone that came to Novi Sad for the General Assembly had big expectations for this crucial event in the ecumenical movement. On behalf of the Governing Board that had served the past 5 years the Conference the President, Anglican Bishop Christopher Hill gave a report and presented the results of the work done in this mandate.

The Assembly focused on three main issues: Hospitality, Justice and Witness and tried to find out how churches will continue to live out a vision of witness, justice and hospitality within the future of Europe.

Hospitality

Bible study leader, Luca Negro tackled the issue by saying that welcoming the stranger and welcoming God in our life are strongly connected. He talked about the concept of philoxenia as it is introduced in the letter to the Hebrews (13.2): “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels”.

In his keynote address Patriarch Mor. Ignatios Aphrem II from the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch and All the East talked about the long history of hospitality in the Middle East from biblical time until today. For example, a third of Lebanon's population is currently Syrian refugees.

Justice

A morning bible study by Elaine Neuenfeld, challenged the Assembly to find the conflict behind the problems both in Scripture and in the world.

Lisa Schneider, former Chairperson from the Ecumenical Youth Council in Europe said in her Keynote address that it is our Christian mandate to strive for justice, especially in order to achieve justice between generations. That means involving youth in the decision-making process and making sure that we also keep in mind the generations to come. Other speakers emphasized the fact that justice is relational and the key factor in building communities today.

Witness

Archbishop Antje Jackelen from Sweden addressed the Assembly on the theme of witness. She said that in minority settings witnessing becomes particularly important and so does the equipping of Christian witnesses.

Reflections on the Future of Europe

On the Christian Presence and witness in the future of Europe participants had the opportunity to listen to The Most Reverend and Right Honorable Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury and to Bishop Petra Bosse-Huber, Head of Ecumenical Relations and Foreign Affairs in the Evangelical Church in Germany.

Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury said that the churches in Europe can renew the vision that promotes peace and reconciliation by practicing peace and reconciliation among each other. Fear is the biggest threat for Europe and also for Christian witnessing.

Bishop Petra Bosse Huber added that it should be natural for Christians to know that borders are nothing for their identity, since Jesus Christ's body surrounds the entire world and in order to know Christ better we should go beyond borders.

During the Assembly the delegates also elected a new President and two vice-presidents along with other 17 members of the new Governing Board. The newly elected president Rev. Christian Krieger closed the Assembly with a message of hope reminding of the promise from Scripture that "we shall see greater things" (John 14.12).

The youth participation during the Assembly was also visible. Besides the youth pre-assembly young people delivered a message saying that they are not only the church of the future but the church of today. Their witness in the church of today is important and shouldn't be ignored.

The message adopted by the Assembly committed CEC to witnessing to Christ as a living testimony of faith and serving Christ through seeking and practicing justice, offering and accepting hospitality.

The Conference of European Churches has been the voice of churches in society and towards the European institutions. This is also what CEC wishes for the future, to be an even stronger voice. The question that remains open is what churches want. How serious do they take this opportunity to have a common voice in society? How seriously do they take the ecumenical dialogue and how seriously do churches take each other? The answers to these questions will also define the future of CEC and the ecumenical movement.

ADRIANA FLOREA