



**”Creating empowering learning opportunities
for new diaconal & church social initiatives”**

Seminar Report

23th – 26th November 2016



Short Introduction

The seminar “Creating empowering learning opportunities for new diaconal & church social initiatives” was a unique opportunity, gathering the representatives of the churches, diaconia and social action of churches in Ukraine, Kirgizstan, and Kazakhstan and of the international educational institution, interdiac, from Czech Republic. We also expected 2 participants from Russia, who unfortunately had to return back to their home country from Minsk due to the health difficulties of one participant.

Such an event, with Asian representation, was the first step for the International Academy for Diaconia and Social action, Central and Eastern Europe, o.p.s (interdiac) to start building up new partnerships and discussing the opportunities for joint cooperation in field of education and further development of diaconia & social actions of churches in the region.

The meeting was co-organised with GELCU (German Evangelical Lutheran church in Ukraine), with whose staff members and volunteers, interdiac has carried out several capacity building & evaluation events and partnerships seminars since 2013 in Dnepropetrovsk and Odessa. The workshop events were held in the church premises of “Deutsches Zentrum” in Odessa. The Seminar was conducted in 3 different languages Russian, German and English.

Reporting on the main findings of the seminar sessions

Sharing Experience and Challenges

The International event was opened with a convivial welcome, sharing words and refreshment. The Invitation to the journey throughout the daily programme and logistical arrangements enabled to the participants to be more settled down in the new learning environment.

As most of the participants met for the first time, the first sessions were devoted to getting to know each other. It was the first step towards openness to each other. Family background, learning path in formal & informal groups and institutions, current working position, living situation, as the personal characteristics already showed the rich diversity of the group.

The multicultural dimension, in terms of family heritage and family relatives, experience of having studied in a different country, having worked in other regions of the country with quite significant cultural and language differences or in different country, or in terms of encountering and working with the people of different faith and religion were seen to be a significant characteristic of the group, which in turn shaped the discussions in following days.

Starting points for the engagement for the diaconal action for and with the people who feel themselves excluded for different reasons and the experiential portfolio of the individual representative have showed the diversity of opportunities given and used and at the same time this revealed a unity in motive based on the personal faith of the participants.

New impulses for diaconal work based on sharing experience, gaining new knowledge about diaconia, getting know more about “interdiac” and exploring what future cooperation could be jointly developed in the Asian context or how to bring more people “on board” diaconia and engage them for this service – summarises the expectations of the participants for the four day event.

Being open for sharing participant’s own life & work in terms of knowledge, skills and experience was stressed by the participants in order to make the event a true learning & living community. On the other hand, participants expressed a fear of feeling “useless” or of having a lack of expertise – and not least the bad weather in Odessa was a negative factor to be overcome!

Starting with Taizé prayer and subsequent morning, midday and evening devotions created a space for personal spiritual reflection and at the same time highlighted the integration of spirituality in interdiac learning events, organised in cooperation with partner organisations. Experiencing other ways of faith expression is one of the learning opportunities during seminars in different contexts.

Another “stopping point”, on the journey of getting to know each other better, included the Introduction of the working contexts by drawing their working place as a boat on the Black sea, which symbolised the positive and threatening surroundings of each participant.

The Identity of each organization and church was made visible by the Christian signs. These elements of recognition were also connected with the previous experience of the people, who have already “come in”, or their friends who recommended them to come and/or the false or unrealistic expectations people have of church and diaconia.

Diaconal action seems to be of big importance in enabling the people around to understand what the “Lutheran church” is about, especially in contexts where the Orthodox Church is in the majority, or in the countries with a major Muslim population. In some contexts the church is not officially recognised by the government and sometimes the church is also being persecuted because of its Christian background.

Additionally, the war situation in Ukraine gives, on one hand a great opportunity to the church to be act locally, and on other hand the limited resources hinder them from engagement as they would wish.

This reflection evoked the response on question about the “future of their boat” – what are the perspectives of the minority Lutheran churches in these particular contexts?

Soup kitchens, clothes distribution, visiting the sick in the hospitals, institutional care for elderly people and people with disabilities, working with disadvantaged children and youth, selling hand made products, the income from which is re-invested in other diaconal activities, are some of the social actions of the churches, volunteers and/or staff members. Exploring the roles and services showed the people’s tasks and responsibilities.

Becoming the church of “one nation” because of the heritage may seem to be a step backwards, but on the contrary, coming close to the people in society today gives a new potential for church growth. The choice of language for leading the worship and for work with the people is necessary to be taken into account, while adapting to the changes.

Advocacy as an integral part of the church and diaconia has been highlighted and the best practice, e.g. from Kirgizstan shared, concerning the introduction of alternative living for those youngsters, who have to leave the orphanage’s after the 10th school year. The church itself runs such kind of service for 10 girls.

Financial independence is considered as one of the biggest challenges, which also may cause difficulties in communication & cooperation with the partner churches, especially abroad. On other hand, the example of Ukrainian Lutheran church is encouraging for those undertaking a more independent journey. Another challenge to be faced are the internal organisational changes to implement the principles of transparency in the management of entrusted resources.

Life Stories and Empowerment

The life stories of the people showed that they want to encourage the people, who feel they are excluded, to “make change themselves” – to empower them, especially if they are excluded in several ways.

In order to do this, in the experience of interdiac, the participants need to learn how to act in empowering way as they build up their working relationships. Therefore it is important that they are well aware of how the process of empowerment has been built up in their own life history and how their own spirituality is embodied in their lives.

To become sensitive to what may support and what may undermine empowerment in the life world of marginalised people and communities, it is important that the worker is sensitive to, and aware of what is supportive and what is undermining in his or her own life. Very often we are unaware or unconscious of the issues important to ourselves that affect our relationships. So we often react out of a prejudice towards the other and relate to this person from out of our own set of rules and our norms, which come from our own socialisation.¹

In the light of the above description, each participant was asked to produce a lifeline, which would make the social relationships in the different phases of life clear. It was important to document particular incidents and events that make an impact on their self- understanding and life-choices building up to making a decision to work with excluded people.

They looked at the way their socio-economic status, gender and ethnic identity have shaped their chances and choices. The questions of values and of religious and spiritual traditions have also been explored.

The rule of confidentiality while sharing the individual lifeline was stressed and it also was stated that no one should feel coerced to share things they do not feel comfortable sharing.

¹ The interdiac Handbook, “Make Change Yourself...” explores this process especially when working with young people. Copies are available from the interdiac office.

Growing up in a Christian family with the significantly influential role of a grandma or on contrary of being raised in non-Christian family were discussed as a background to different peoples involvement. Then among others, the following factors were mentioned most frequent turning moments in the life of people, which made them to decide to work in the diaconal field:

- putting into action the values and norms taught in the church,
- getting know the personality of Jesus Christ better,
- marriage, and having the support of life partner who has an understanding for this diaconal “working orientation”,
- listening to God’s call and giving a response,
- certain kinds of education, e.g. theological or music studies,
- health problems and an inner fight to search for God,
- finding the place in the Lutheran church, as the orthodox church was too formal and did not “uncover” God’s face,
- during a life crisis, the invitation to join the Worship in the church and experience something “special”, which has kept the people engaged till now,
- reading the children’s Bible and the Bible or other literature from Dostoyevsky,
- participation in a Christian youth camp,
- realising the importance of the understanding that faith should be expressed in deeds.

Learning from the Contexts

The Intercultural evening, with a pool of different media and resources, underlined the richness of the contexts from which the people come. This definitely supported the level of understanding and enhanced sensitivity towards differences. Having a tour in the city of Odessa also contributed to deeper understanding of cultural, societal and political differences, since the city has been transformed throughout the centuries when the city was a part of different empires, under different regimes.

Informal talks on the occasions such as sharing food or just enjoying conversation together during evening tea strengthened the ties between people.

We were privileged to learn about diaconal action in the Ukrainian context, through the introductions and lively discussions the representatives, working for the Diaconal Station of Odessa congregation and of the Christian NGO “Living Hope”. Both presenters stressed the personal motivation for their involvement in their work orientation and how the spiritual life embodied their decision.

The wide range of the activities - with refugees from the eastern part of Ukraine, a therapeutic seminar with the families suffering under the war consequences, the support group of psychologists providing counselling, supervision for the psychologists and those staff & volunteers who provide the first hand support to those who are differently affected by the war, home care for the elderly people, empowerment of the children & youngsters who “nobody loves”, distribution of food and medicine, support of the self – help group of HIV affected – gave an picture about the involvement of staff members and local volunteers with the support of both the international and national funding institutions and individuals.

The role of media in different national contexts in relation to their presentation of the current political situation in Ukraine was discussed. It was shown how propaganda had already influenced the views of the participants themselves before they came to Ukraine.

Encountering the Ukrainian people and having a possibility for open exchange of information have shown a different experience.

Giving an Introduction on interdiac as the international learning institution, its approach to learning on the example of the learning model, stressed the importance of the engagement of the interdiac partner organizations in running educational events jointly in their working contexts, and in sharing very current experience of carrying out the study programmes. This sharing can also give new inputs for the development of the Ideas for future cooperation.

Conclusions

Individual action plans were elaborated by each participant and they will be followed bilaterally or multilaterally on local and international level. The importance of the diaconia for the credibility of church was stressed. In order to live out and implement the profile of diaconia, by concrete deeds, education of the volunteers & workers, their motivation and empowerment are seen to be very crucial. As the "pool" for the recruitment of new diaconal co-workers with the learning potential and compassion should be the local congregations.

In the words of participants, the meeting has opened a new door for new training opportunities, as the need for the empowerment of the diaconia workers is great.