A DREAM AND A VISION: THE ECUMENICAL GLOBAL GATHERING OF YOUTH AND STUDENTS

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As a member and product of the 1960s generation, having been involved in youth and student work for over a decade, I can bear witness to the profound changes in the way young people see and experience religion and church life nowadays. There is a huge gap between my generation’s slogans and the bitter diatribe against the church as an institution which seemingly had sold its soul to the oppressive and unjust status quo, and the present generation’s craving to be listened to and allowed to partake fully in the Church’s life and mission.

As never before in the past three decades, Christian youth seem eager to share their lot with whatever future God is engineering for the church in the third millennium. In this context, the Ecumenical Global Gathering of Youth and Students (EGGYS) is one avenue for young people to experience the gift of ecumenism anew, to explore and test new visions of community life, and to carry out the church’s mission in ways which are more faithful to the gospel.

The past and recent history behind EGGYS

In the 1940s and 1950s a world gathering of Christian youth was not big news: there were three world conferences of Christian youth between 1939 and 1952 (Amsterdam, 1939; Oslo, 1947; Kerala, 1952). At that time, the overall Christian community rejoiced over the fact that those events served to nurture a new ecumenical leadership and to forge new ecumenical visions. Following the Kerala conference, the so-called World Christian Youth Commission remained active throughout the 1960s and was responsible for a variety of initiatives that deepened ecumenical work among youth and student groups. After that, there were quite a few local and regional ecumenical undertakings jointly sponsored by two or more youth and student movements.

1 With kind permission taken from the National Council of Churches Review (India), 112(1992)9, 564-573.
2 Manuel Quintero is organizing secretary of the process leading up to the Ecumenical Global Gathering of Youth and Students, and of the Gathering itself.
Around 1985, the idea of a world gathering of Christian youth was launched anew in the WCC’s circles and over the following two years a running conversation on the feasibility of such a gathering unfolded, involving staff and leaders from the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF), the World Alliance of YMCA.s, and the World YWCA. Eventually, two major Roman Catholic movements, the Internal Movement of Catholic Students (IMCS) and the International Young Catholic Students (IYCS), were invited to this dialogue and the first ecumenical consultation on youth was held at the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey in May 1988. At that consultation, participants declared that the "deepening and strengthening of our common ecumenical commitment is our obedience to the Spirit of God as manifested in Pentecost".

One year later, a second ecumenical consultation on youth was convened to reflect on the issue of Christian mission in a pluralistic society, again at the Bossey Ecumenical Institute (June 1989). The representatives from the six organizations expressed their hope that the "wholeness of the body of Christ will be restored" and stated their commitment to strive for unity as an important issue in Christian youth’s agenda. The meeting served as well to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the first world conference of Christian youth. It could have been just another ecumenical ceremony except that 11 of the 46 participants had attended the first Christian world youth conference in Amsterdam in 1939! Hence the meeting became more than a symbolic act of recognition: it was the encounter of two generations which had a common missionary calling though in rather different historical contexts.

In order to test these ideas beyond the scope of the international staff and leadership, a conference was called in Limuru, Kenya, in April 1990, under the theme "Gathering for Witness". In Limuru, 50 young people from 26 countries experienced what Dorothy Sölle calls "a feeling of powerlessness" and yet were able to speak about "the signals of hope... that will strengthen us in an ecumenical spirit for the purpose of building a new future". The Limuru conference was instrumental in helping partner organisations identify a number of topics and issues which ought to be addressed throughout the process and at the Gathering itself.

Between 1988 and 1992, the staff working group met several times to carry

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3 YMCA = Young Men Christian Association.
4 YWCA = Young Women Christian Association.
5 The staff working group consists of representatives from the international secretariats of the six organisations, four of which have their headquarters in Geneva (WSCF, World YWCA, World Alliance of YMCA.s and WCC) and two in Paris (IMCS, IYCS).