

European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN) 11th Assembly, Helsinki – June 2016

Water in a Sustainable Future

“Let justice roll down like waters” (Amos 5:24)

“Water connects public health, food security, liveable cities, energy for all, environmental well-being and climate action. Water and sanitation are necessary for human dignity and economic growth” (World Health Organisation)

On the shores of the Baltic sea surrounded by verdant forest over 80 participants from 23 countries gathered at the Orthodox Sofia Centre for the 2016 Assembly of the European Christian Environment Network (ECEN). Members of different denominations and confessions came together to discuss ***‘Water in a Sustainable Future’***, particularly in the context of the UN Paris Agreement on Climate Change concluded the preceding December.



Across our continent we are faced with water challenges, crises and catastrophes. The experience of too little water around the Mediterranean contrasts with the excessive pressure of rising sea levels and ocean acidification elsewhere, and flash flooding almost anywhere. Then there is the loss of good quality fresh water from retreating ice, polluted rivers and lakes, and over-extraction from below ground. Commercially, water is treated more as a market commodity than a human right, and millions in our countries (and elsewhere) do not have access to good quality supplies. Many of these issues are related to Climate Change all over the world and are highlighted in work such as the United Nations’ ‘Sustainable Development Goals’ (SDGs).

This was the context of this ECEN Assembly and speakers referred to both the need to respect and treat water as a gift and source of life before God, and also to speak out when people and places are denied access to this precious element.

Rt. Revd. Graham Usher, Anglican Bishop of Dudley, began the event formally by reminding those present of the richness of water as symbol in Scriptures – from the waters of Genesis to the river of life in Revelation, water flows to express the hospitality of God. Yet, as a resource, we manage water badly wasting so much in agriculture, industry and in our homes.

There is a need to change our ways, said Finnish woman theologian Pauliina Kainulainen. Our society today needs more balance, moderation and reciprocity. As our tears can open up a space within us for something new, so we need to lament of our abuse of water and rediscover that hope should be embedded in a reverential and grateful love for the good Earth.

Dr. Panu Pihkala called us to respond to the massive pastoral challenge presented by the eco-crisis, and to grow new narratives regarding the future of the world through stories of best practice – hope in the midst of tragedy.



11,000 years of climate stability has enabled human civilisation to flourish, but the future is now uncertain. *"God is within us and opposite us"*, cited Jukka Uosukainen (UNFCCC). Time is running out and nobody is in control! Humankind has to develop a more bottom up approach to solving our problems with civil society pushing for a localisation of ethical and technological solutions rapidly moving away from carbon-based fuels.

Karin Lexén, Director of the Stockholm International Water Institute, spoke of the parts of the world where water is *"too much, too little or too dirty"*. With growing demands from an increasing human population, water risks will be especially acute in the next 10 years. If demand goes up by 55% we cannot have 'business as usual'.

Many of the world's refugees are displaced because of water issues – drought, flooding, sea-rises, loss of forests and lakes. Intense water pollution is a forceful factor for others – from mining, transport and farming.

As communities experience more extreme weather events, water needs to be higher on the political agenda. We have to also consider more seriously 'virtual' or 'hidden' water – embedded in food growing, manufacturing, transport, etc. This is a key task for our churches and civil society.



"Indifference towards the vitality of water constitutes both a blasphemy to God the Creator and a crime against humanity". (Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I)

Metropolitan Ambrosius (head of the Finnish Orthodox Church) was one of a number of church leaders speaking whose views of the current state of the world was very sobering, suggesting we are not anti-consumer enough in our churches. In an increasingly broken world, the time for statements is over and the need for action essential. Woman Lutheran Bishop Irja Askola approved that addressing the state of God's Earth is not an additional extra, but central to a gospel of love and hope. *"We are now a big humanity on a small planet"* they both said. This demands a new **'eco-reformation'** for our time. Let us contemplate a new culture....



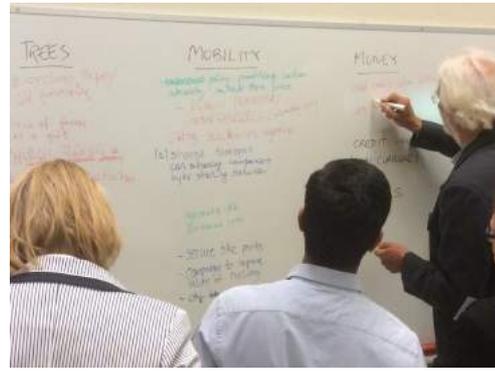
Climate Change is a fatal experience and challenge, and to be quiet is to say that we do not care, stated Lutheran Archbishop Kari Mäkinen. We must question the rush for profit and hope for new life as yet unseen. There are three ways to encourage this – through positive every day stories, by researching for alternative ways of living, and in calling for justice for the vulnerable. If human activity is crucifying the Earth, it is time to wake up and resurrect a different kind of society.

The Assembly at the Sofia Centre was interspersed by worship from different traditions: a Finnish Orthodox 'Blessing of Water, in which we poured water from our own countries into a common bowl. Lutheran morning prayer, Catholic reflections and joining different congregations at the three Cathedrals in Helsinki on our opening day.



We heard of projects and campaigns from many churches and countries. *'Greenopolis'* in Romania, tree planting in Hungary, reintroducing hemp in Italy, establishing a *'Greed-line'* in Crete, developing political alliances in Norway, producing renewable energy in the Netherlands, agricultural and tourism development programmes in Armenia, pilgrimages in Germany and much more.

The younger people at the Assembly from bodies such as the World Student Christian Federation in Europe invited everyone to participate in a practical exercise to assess the 'virtual water' found in the production of food, cars and other goods. We were also encouraged to devise a 24 hour journey for a family travelling from Sicily to Finland using as little carbon and water as possible!



There were a number of thematic working groups – Eco-Management (of church buildings and land), Biodiversity, Theology and Worship, Transition (to a low-carbon economy), Education and Climate Change. Each of this is active in its field and will continue some of the ECEN work over the next few years.

A final outcomes statement was produced with a series of recommendations for action to be taken in our church communities and institutions in Europe. [See full paper here](#). These included:

- Re-emphasising the sacredness and wonder of water, and its role in sustaining life and ecosystems through the whole earthly creation as it reveals the glory of God.
- Educating ourselves of the value we attach to water and its use in everyday life and reminding ourselves that water is a gift for life. This includes learning about the water footprint of food production, especially for meat, and the promotion of vegetarian diets.
- Drinking pipe-line tap water rather than bottled!
- Avoiding using harmful chemicals in agriculture, households, industry, and mineral and fossil fuel extraction.
- Reducing the excessive pollution and waste of our personal water use.
- Rediscovering more contemplative lifestyles based on the quality of life for all, rather than the quantity of goods for a few.
- Engaging in the ecological debate by empowering people to share the world's resources more equitably and promoting water as a common good.

In the closing words of this paper: *"The problems of the world, such as those related to climate change and water, are very severe. Often it is difficult to be optimistic. However, we want to emphasize the significance and perseverance of hope. God is with us in all situations. So may we all work towards a better world, where justice more often flows like a rolling stream . . ."*



For further details see: www.ecen.org

Martyn Goss, June 2016



European Christian **environmental** network

