



Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe

Commission des Eglises auprès des Migrants en Europe

Kommission der Kirchen für Migranten in Europa

Anti-racism work is work of love

The Round Table brought together 28 representatives from CCME and CEC member churches and organisations from 14 countries. In four thematic workshops the participants developed strategies for actions against and prevention of racial violence, for churches at local, national and European levels.

The discussions took account of the fact that churches are working in different contexts and at different speeds in their efforts to address the issue of racism. They therefore have differing needs and capacities for action. It was recognised that, in spite of this diversity, all churches and congregations in Europe have the responsibility to reconsider their own attitudes and practices towards Blacks and migrants, and to engage in anti-racism work in their own societies.

In his opening address to the Round Table, Colin Prescod of the Institute of Race Relations, London, said, "Within the churches there is little knowledge that racism is a key element of western culture. It is an issue which is painful to address because it is so deeply rooted in the way people are brought up within it." He emphasised that each white westerner grows up with a sense of being superior, and that this message is communicated through education, stories and media. Kanyana Mutombo, a freelance journalist from Switzerland echoed this and said, "People working in the media are also imbued with this attitude. Thus they perpetuate it in stereotyping others"

Both speakers said that racism has structured the world's power relationships for centuries. Colin Prescod pointed out that this has been the basis for colonialism, slavery and imperialism. Today we are still witnessing the dominance of a culture of violence the world over. Since September 11, 2001, dominant political discourse has been using a language and encouraging a crusade attitude that feeds into everyday racism. This has resulted in an alarming increase in racial attacks. It is also seen in the way suffering is

portrayed in media reports on human catastrophes occurring in different parts of the world. For example, openly showing dying people in Africa, but showing covered bodies in New York, manifests a hierarchical understanding of human dignity.

The use of pictures in church aid agencies' materials showing Black people and migrants suffering can contribute to negative public opinion. This can be avoided by using positive images of other cultures. Kanyana Mutombo challenged the churches by addressing them as one of the media sources that needs to change, by critically rethinking their own prejudices and cultural presuppositions.

Inger Nesvag, a trainer in dialogue and diversity programmes in Norway, quoted Dr Martin Luther King's saying, "Ignorance is not as far from the truth as prejudices". She has concluded that one can get through to people's prejudices and overcome them. This is the educational challenge set before the churches. Inger proposed that this task be tackled by developing educational tools which allow for true dialogue and participatory learning methods. The participants at the Round Table got the chance to experience this through role playing.

Annemarie Dupré, from the Refugee and Migrants Service of the Federation of Evangelical Churches in Italy, picked up the same theme and insisted on the need for openness for personal encounters. She strongly emphasised the fact that migration is normal and an integral part of human history. Thus churches should work against the marginalisation and criminalisation of migration. Instead of seeking elaborate defensive measures against it, they should raise awareness of the normality and legitimacy of migrants' diverse situations. She suggested Christians become aware of the tragedy of forced migration as a consequence of existential economic struggles and of violent conflicts and wars. Immigration measures should take into consideration the different personal motivations and situations of migrants. This is a deeply pastoral approach which challenges the churches at the very heart of their mission in society. In practice, she warned against approaching migrants as victims rather than as actors in their own life stories. She went on to say that to fight discrimination and racism is a "work of love".

Vera Egenberger, Director of the European Network Against Racism (ENAR) based in Belgium, outlined some of the most recently adopted European Union legal measures. She cited Article 13 of the Amsterdam Treaty and the Race

Directive, and the Employment Directive. These directives still need to be implemented in each EU state through national legislation. The deadline for implementing the Race Directive is July 2003. Vera Egenberger challenged her churches to encourage their national governments to fulfill their obligations. In doing so, churches can play an important political role in their countries. Furthermore, churches can cooperate with governments and other groups in implementing National Action Plans to follow up recommendations of the UN World Conference Against Racism (Durban 2001).