

CCME PRESS RELEASE 18th March 2009

Migrant Christians' Participation in European Churches: Need to Go Beyond "Filling Empty Church Benches"

CCME debate opens space for critical reflection on churches' role in migrant integration

Some thirty representatives of churches from six European countries met in Brussels 15-17 March 2009. The participants, coming from both historical European churches and migrant-led churches, discussed best practice models of migrants' active participation in the life of European churches. The workshop was the first event of the MIRACLE project (Models of Integration through Religion, Activation, Cultural Learning and Exchange), coordinated by the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME). The project looks at methods and strategies of European churches to win migrants as active members and the changes needed for churches to become more open and welcoming spaces for newly arrived persons.

The participants, representing the six European partners of the project, presented reports illustrating their national or regional situations and projects about working with migrant realities and congregations. Concepts like 'integration', 'identity', 'mainstream churches' and 'migrant churches' have been at the core of the discussion, highlighting different points of view. Participants with recent migration experience underlined the importance of the initial welcome received when wanting to join activities of the traditional European churches which is often disappointing. "Newly arrived are knocking on the doors of European churches - can we still hear them?" one participant asked. Others highlighted the need for European churches to become more inclusive: "We cannot limit ourselves to filling empty church benches". At the same time, several participants in critical self-reflection asked if migrant-led churches were often too self-sufficient and not making enough effort to relate to the traditional churches.

Participants learned about the WinAct training, which aims at winning migrants as active members for political parties and trade unions by targeted recruitment and organisational change. The MIRACLE project will test the methods in a religious context, based on the assessment that Christian churches and communities could be playing a decisive role in the integration process that involves and changes both newly arrived and hosting society. Also other intercultural methods were introduced, stimulating a reflection on what welcoming newcomers means in the historical churches, and whether migrant integration within churches is easier or more complicated than within the hosting society. Over the next 15 months, a series of national events and trainings will test and revise different methods towards churches "uniting in diversity".

CCME General Secretary Doris Peschke highlighted the imperative of integration between migrant churches and traditional churches: "Wherever we are part of a migrant church or of a mainstream one, we cannot make it by our own (...) we all believe in one universal Church, but if a church stands apart by itself it can never resemble this one Church" she commented.

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The Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) is the ecumenical agency on migration and integration, asylum and refugees, and against racism and discrimination in Europe. Members are Anglican, Orthodox and Protestant Churches and Councils of Churches as well as church-related agencies across Europe. CCME formally cooperates with the Conference of European Churches and the World Council of Churches.



INITI-CA 2007

The MIRACLE project is co-financed by the Integration Fund -Centralised Actions 2007 of the European Commission (DG JLS). The views expressed and information provided by the project and the partners involved do not necessarily reflect the point of view of the European Commission and do in no way fall under the responsibility of the European Commission.