

Message of the Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions

## **“Ask people what they need.”**

*This is the first step in building a welcoming society; a society which grows when we respect the dignity of all human beings. Representatives of Justice and Peace Commissions from Europe learned this through their contact with different social action movements at their annual meeting held in Copenhagen and Malmö.*

We, the Conference of European *Justice and Peace* Commissions, held our General Assembly and International Workshops in Copenhagen and Malmö from September 25 – 28, 2015. During the International Workshops “*European models of living together – experiences in Copenhagen and Malmö*” commissions from twenty European countries explored issues involved with migrants, asylum seekers and integration of new comers. This focus is especially pertinent in the light of life threatening political crises, which have caused millions of Syrian, Iraqi and Eritrean peoples to flee to Europe from their homelands.

In Copenhagen, we visited a representative of the Danish Parliament, the Danish Institute of Human Rights, and Politikenshus, a media concern. Additionally, we attended a Panel Discussion “*Danish national church and foreigners*” where members of different Christian denominations and an Imam participated. In Malmö we visited the Islamic Center in Rosengård, Ögårdsskolan, a Muslim primary school, Sancta Maria Catholic Open College, Swedish Lutheran Church in Rosengård, Dialogforum, a project of the Malmö city antidiscrimination program, and Yalla Trappan, a work integration social enterprise, where we met people from many cultures and religious traditions.

Interestingly, our experience of the Danish and Swedish situations paralleled our local experiences as national commissions from other European countries. In this way the Danish and Swedish situations reflect a European experience of response to questions of migrants, asylum seekers and the integration of new comers including refugees. During our encounters and discussions with people of Copenhagen and Malmö, three themes became apparent: addressing fears as well as giving hope, moral leadership, a long term-vision for society.

Fear was a common theme in our visits and discussions. This fear took at least three different forms: fear of losing culture and identity, fear that the welfare state will collapse when large numbers of foreigners overwhelm the system and fear that foreigners will take job opportunities of the local people. We also encountered hope. This hope took the form of projects empowering women, training the jobless, providing encounter opportunities and other opportunities for dialogue between diverse peoples.

In our discussions we also addressed a second theme: politicians and other opinion makers, citizens as well as faith based and non-governmental organisations can be vital voices of moral authority and credibility. We were reminded during our workshops that opinion makers and social actors are critical contributors to building welcoming *or* inhospitable societies.

Building welcoming societies is the responsibility of all democratic and human rights oriented organisations and movements whose ethical foundations are all based upon a core

understanding of all humans as being of equal value. We, members of *Justice and Peace Europe*, understand ourselves to be responsible for the promotion of welcoming societies. In his address to the US Congress on September 24, 2015 Pope Francis defined a good society as one, which, “... endures when it seeks, as a vocation, to satisfy common needs by stimulating the growth of all its members, especially those in situations of greater vulnerability or risk.”

Taking responsibility for fulfilling society’s vocation means we, members of *Justice and Peace Europe*, seek to:

- offer concrete facts and broader perspectives as response to fears and as a means to address arguments against welcoming societies;
- promote a welcoming society, by asking first those who are vulnerable or at risk what they need and serving these needs;
- support and encourage politicians and opinion makers with credibility to make unambiguous statements and advance policies, which support the development of welcoming societies in Europe.

*The Conference of European Justice and Peace Commissions (Justice and Peace Europe) is the alliance of 31 Justice and Peace Commissions in Europe, working for the promotion of justice, peace and respect for human dignity. Justice and Peace Europe contributes to raising awareness of the Catholic social doctrine in the European societies and the European institutions. Its General Secretariat is based in Brussels.*

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