



CEC TRG on Employment and Social Issues – 14-15 January 2016

Minutes

Participants: OKR Ralf Charbonnier, Vladimir Gerka, Rev Juha Mattila, Dr Vassilios Meichanetsidis, Rev Fr George Valcu

Apologies: Prof Constantin Delikostantis, Dr Martin Schenk and Eva Ungvari

TOP 1 Welcome and opening

Fischbach welcomed the participants and opened the meeting with a short meditation on the Gospel of St. Matthew 8, 23-27.

Fischbach explained that this first meeting of the CEC TRG aims to inform about the work of CEC in this area in the context of the renewed CEC after the Budapest Assembly 2013, to exchange information between the participants and the debates in their churches on this topic, and to identify the objective(s) of this TRG for future work.

TOP 2 Presentations of the Members of the TRG on Employment and Social Issues

TOP 3 The CEC Mandate to this TRG

The participants discussed the CEC Mandate. It was underlined that the CEC TRGs have, in general, an advisory role to the Governing Board. But they are responsible for discussing and identifying the CEC work programme 2015-2018 within its mandate. The specific mandate for the TRG is rather open and flexible, but refers especially to the EU policy in this area. The close relationship to Eurodiaconia and its work is highlighted. Therefore, Eurodiaconia will be represented at the meetings of this TRG to enrich the debate of the TRG, to enable a more long-term planning between CEC and Eurodiaconia and to avoid duplication of work.

The communication between the different TRGs will be ensured by the exchange of each groups' minutes.¹ Short summaries of the meetings will be sent also to the CEC constituency, so that CEC members are informed about the main developments and discussions.

TOP 4 An overview of CEC's work in this area in the last years

Fischbach introduced the main areas of work in CEC over the last years with a PowerPoint presentation (attached). He highlighted four focus areas:

- The CSC-CEC policy paper "Family and Europe"
- Europe 2020 strategy and the European Semester
- European Sunday Alliance
- CEC Ad-Hoc Working Group on European Economic Governance

¹ In the CEC Collegium meeting 19 and 20.01.2016 we have decided to establish an Extranet on the CEC-website where the TRG minutes will be available for all members of the CEC TRGs. More concrete information will be delivered soon.

The CALL-network is also part of these main areas, but was presented in another TOP.

The participants had a short discussion about the role of theology in these discussions. With the engagement of the work-free Sunday the Christian identity becomes visible and this should not be avoided because of practical or political reasons and the mainstream conviction in a society. Otherwise churches would be subjected to a process of self-secularization. On the other hand, churches have to be aware that the voice of the church in modern society will only be heard, recognized and discussed if it communicates in a secular understandable way.

TOP 5 Presentation of the work of Eurodiaconia in Brussels

Heather Roy presented Eurodiaconia with a PowerPoint presentation (attached). She pointed out that a paradox situation is sometimes observed in the implementation of fundamental rights, so that e.g. the social right for shelter applied to refugees but not to homeless people. She informed that the collegium of the Commissioners had recently an exchange about the development of an EU social pillar of minimum standards and rights.

The participants had an exchange about the culture of welcoming refugees into Europe and the question how churches can act and react to the question of integration of persons coming from a different cultural and religious background and what the consequences will be for Europe and the churches.

Roy explained that the relation of European Economic Governance and social policy; aspects of employment in Europe, such as decent work, fair work, minimum or living wages; moral topics for instance child poverty might be subjects for TRG-ESI.

TOP 6 Information of the Members of the TRG about main priority areas of their churches in the field of employment and social issues – European aspects

Dr Meichanetsidis – GR

High unemployment rate – 27%; very high youth unemployment rate – 50%. Social security benefits end after 1 year and support is needed. This has an impact on families and their decision to have children with consequences for demography. The ongoing immigration and the social crisis stimulate conflicts and tensions in society. Salaries are low, but taxes high. Poverty is present at a high level. Solidarity with the refugees is still exercised in society and especially by the church.. The church also combats human trafficking. A crisis of the family model has to be recognized, introduced by the western family as an alternative family model. A law on a cohabitation pact regarding homosexual couples was put in place. Meichanetsidis works for “Apostoli”, an Orthodox organisation for philanthropy. It offers food, health support, education, programmes against unemployment, assistance for minor refugees, services for disabled persons. With this programmes it employs people. It uses EU-funds. It cooperates with and is supported by the Anglican Church.

Vladimir Gerka – SL

The Orthodox Church in Czech and Slovak Lands maintains an Orthodox faculty, which offers studies on diaconal/charitable social work. These studies are open to everybody and contain all three degrees (Bachelor, Master, PhD). The church is engaged practically in an orphanage, houses for elderly people (together with other organisations). The parishes provide individual programmes for homeless people, food banks etc. The unemployment rate is much higher in the eastern parts of SL. Unemployment creates problems for families.

Mattila – FL

Mattila introduced the situation in FL and the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland with a PowerPoint presentation (attached).

Dr Charbonnier – DE

The EKD is very much occupied with the refugee crisis and the challenges of integration. It observes the tensions on these questions in Europe and the EU. The EKD Synod 2016 will have Europe as a topic. With regard to family questions homosexual couples in Germany are asking for a marriage status.

The EKD has elected recently a new Council. This Council has now to decide on the central topics for the EKD. Recent topics were the digitalisation and significance of the 3rd sector in the economy and society, the mission to preach the Gospel to the young generation. 2015 the EKD Council issued a document on solidarity at work in a changing working world.

Fr George Valcu – RO

The economic and social crisis, which is lasting much longer than 2008, has serious consequences for society. It is also a moral crisis. The unemployment rate is low by 5%, the youth unemployment rate only a bit higher, but long-term unemployment is rising. But social exclusion is a widespread phenomenon. The Orthodox Church of Romania runs projects with EU-funds for training, social economy projects and vocational training. It also founded private companies. Romania is not exposed to migration to the same extent as other countries, but the church calls for a spirit of welcoming. People are leaving the rural areas for Western Europe with consequences for demography. Poverty and extreme poverty exists in the urban area, because of unemployment, but also because of low salaries and high costs. The church and its parishes offer food distribution, social centres and social canteens. In society a discussion about same sex couples and their civic status is taking place. Furthermore, pressure on family life exists because family members, parents are working in Western Europe and the children grow up in a different setting – often with the grandparents or others.

The churches in Brussels have to advocate that EU funds can be used by the churches and church organisations to be a possible partner.

TOP 7 Brain storming and Conclusions

The participants discussed possible themes for the TRG-ESI. Fischbach informed that the CEC Governing Board will approach the CEC TRGs in preparation for the thematic work of the CEC Assembly 2018.

One possible topic might be the demographic development in Europe and its consequences for societies and the churches, but also the analysis of the causes of the demography. The consequences for the pension systems are relevant for the whole of society. One discussion point might be if, and to what extent, immigration can solve the upcoming problems. Churches could discuss the change of values and world view which have led to this process.

Digitalisation is becoming an important topic in the labour world, in society and in its consequences for the churches.

The European discussion about minimum standards relating to employment, as well as social issues, might be interesting. This is not only about the definition of minimum, but also about the rationale to discuss and to implement social and labour rights on a minimum basis, but not going beyond.

Fischbach informed about the development of the CALL-network and the idea of transforming the network, which faced rising problems in the last years. (attached document). In UK the churches are engaged in a discussion on decent work and living wages.

Eurodiaconia is engaged in the employment area as far as it is related to the care sector.

Professional, but also the informal working area might be a topic. This relates also to religious traditions.

Christian traditions differ in their understanding of work and employment, but they go beyond a pure economic understanding. This understanding might be of interest for a future and renewed understanding of labour. In this discussion the question of the use of the “fruits of our labour”, the contribution to society, e.g. by taxes, has to take place.

In the context of recent EU discussions the platform for undeclared work, about precarious – decent work, trafficking for work, the question of entrepreneurship and the concept of wages and salaries, inequalities, could be integrated into this debate.

The participants concluded to reflect and discuss further in this direction at the next meeting on employment and labour – to describe different theological, confessional concepts of labour, to formulate a distinguished common understanding of labour beyond a pure economic definition and to identify aspects of recent and urgent European discussions on labour and employment which might be of interest for a contribution on the part of CEC.

TOP 8 AOB

Proposal for the next meeting:

Favourite date: 5-6 September 2016

2nd option: 19-20 September 2016

Frank-Dieter Fischbach

28.01.2016

Attachments