

# **Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe Conference of European Churches**

**Living in Community – Towards equal opportunities  
and overcoming discrimination  
The situation of Roma in Central and Eastern Europe.**

**Conference in Bratislava, 2-6 May 2001**

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHURCHES-CONTRIBUTIONS TO LIVING IN COMMUNITY, EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES AND OVERCOMING DISCRIMINATION**

### **1. General Conclusions of the conference**

Christian churches believe that all people, every person, is created by God in His own image. Therefore, churches uphold the life of every person in human dignity and equal opportunities. It is thus vital to meet in mutual respect, the approach of the one teaching the other should be avoided and a spirit of learning from each other should be developed. The right to be different needs to be recognised when considering concepts for integration.

Consideration needs to be given to differences in various contexts: whereas in most West European societies, Roma constitute a small percentage of the population, they are large minorities in a number of Central and East European countries; in some places they may even constitute local majorities. Roma persons are as different among themselves as any other people, each person an individual.

Across Europe, Roma have had to face neglect, harassment, persecution, and many of them have been murdered. There is a need to recognise this history, which to some extent lives on in the minds of both Roma and other European peoples. To be able to enter into true dialogue, European peoples need to recognise what they/we did to wrong the Roma in the past.

The churches have been part of this history: In many countries, they have excluded Roma from church services and refused them sacraments or marriages.

Empowerment of disadvantaged Roma individuals and communities, as well as giving them options, choices for self-determination, should be opened up.

Churches are called to become more actively involved in empowerment of Roma and building new inclusive communities. They should carefully consider their relationships with governments and authorities which have the political obligation to provide protection and participation for the national minorities on their respective territories.

Churches should seek cooperation at all levels with Roma organisations.

## **2. Theology/Churches**

The churches are called upon to open up their structures, liturgies and language to Roma concerns, traditions and values. This requires readiness to accept challenges and to change, and to engage in empowering of lay and professional activists to cooperate with Roma. Churches and parishes can contribute to an inclusive concept of community.

The churches and councils of churches should look into their own history with Roma and express their repentance for wrongs in the past. As examples from some countries have shown, these acts of repentance open the ways for reconciliation and new, open and honest encounter.

Theological faculties should be encouraged to do research into church history in relation to Roma, and social and practical theology departments especially should be encouraged to analyse the social conditions of Roma and the problems of exclusion.

At parish level, it is recommended that the integration of Roma be fostered through activities like mixed parish groups of Roma and non-Roma. This could be a means to reduce fears of contact and build confidence.

While there should not be segregation in the churches and parishes, it may be important to provide for Roma to meet among themselves and have services in the Romany language. Churches should assist in training pastors from the Roma communities. If there are Romany congregations, the neighbouring parishes should be encouraged to meet and share with them regularly. Regional or national church bodies should include the leadership of the Roma parishes, and should promote sharing. To facilitate these processes, churches could train lay persons or pastors as mediators, or nominate a knowledgeable person as Roma focal point for a specific region.

The recommendation by the Central Committee of the Conference of European Churches of October last year, in which the churches in Europe are called upon to dedicate a specific time of the year to meet and pray with Roma, was endorsed and should be followed up.

Mission and evangelisation are important to the churches. Particular attention should be given to the dangers of neglecting the faiths of others, and of proselytism as its extreme form. To be able to deal with these issues, churches and parishes could establish regular ecumenical encounters among the Christian denominations and enter into dialogue with other faith communities.

Different traditions express a specific spirituality. Since churches should not be a tool of assimilation, churches should encourage to work, jointly with Roma, on liturgies which may be relevant to Roma communities.

Diaconia is an important part of church life. Diaconal work with Roma is of particular importance and a participatory approach is extremely important. We would encourage churches to become more involved in social counselling and advice.

### **3. Social conditions**

Churches' involvement in improving social conditions should not replace national and local governments' obligations in these fields. Churches could, however be pro-active in developing pilot projects and lobbying authorities to provide resources.

Housing and accommodation is a particular problem for many Roma communities. Churches at parish and regional level should lobby for adequate housing facilities, including water and electricity supply. In some cases, churches may be able to provide buildings, or lease church grounds for construction. In other cases, a guarantee to a Roma community may be needed to ensure durable solutions. In these fields we recommend co-operation and dialogue with, and from time to time also critique of, local and national governments.

The same applies to the area of access to health care. It is recommended that a broader approach to preventive health care be followed, including basic hygiene as well as health education and family planning. However, it is of extreme importance to consider context and living conditions when designing these programmes. Churches could assist in training medical advisors/trainers from the Roma communities who are able to communicate with their communities. It may also be important to train medical personnel to enable them to approach Roma with more sensitivity. In some Roma communities some wise methods of healing may still be found, including knowledge of herbal treatment, which should be considered for the value which it has and incorporated into health action plans.

Unemployment is one of the most severe problems. Churches and parishes could assist in lobbying employers and institutions to employ Roma. They may also lobby for the establishment of community projects, and encourage self-employment including traditional arts and crafts. This should be complemented by providing access to markets and improving marketing and management skills. There is a need to support advanced training as well.

Micro-credit may be a good instrument for some projects, but attention should be given to possible dependencies and other consequences. Churches should monitor the use of such instruments closely, so they do not end up placing the additional burden of payments for social services on the weakest and poorest in the society.

The prohibition of child labour and the protection of children according to the International Convention on the Rights of the Child should be monitored and invoked. Roma are often stigmatised as abusing their children, although in the Roma tradition family and children are regarded as precious. Child abuse is often a consequence of

poverty. Roma communities with little or no income need support and protection so that they do not become trapped by criminal organisations trafficking in human beings, particularly children and women. This requires close international cooperation, and the churches may be in a position to help with the international church network.

#### **4. Education**

Access to education is a fundamental right. But social conditions often prevent Roma children in particular from attending school. While primary education is generally free of charge, the acquisition of adequate clothing or textbooks may constitute insurmountable problems. Churches at the local level may be in a position to identify concrete hurdles and provide assistance, or advise the local or school authorities on possible improvements. In a situation of inadequate housing, some Roma children may have difficulty finding a place where they can do their homework. Parishes can encourage school attendance by providing afternoon care for children and assistance with homework. Where a lack of language skills is identified as a major problem, school authorities should be advised to provide additional training for disadvantaged groups.

In addition, school textbooks often lack relevance to Roma history and traditions. Therefore special attention should be given to the development of teaching curricula, and Roma organisations should be asked to assist in developing textbooks. This should be directed also at informing the majority about the values and traditions of the minority so that prejudice against the minority can better be combatted.

Secondary and advanced training is of particular importance in preparing people for job opportunities. To increase the percentage of Roma gaining access to these options, scholarship programmes for Roma and personal tutors could be envisaged.

#### **5. Migration**

Roma communities should not be prohibited from travelling across European borders simply because they are Roma. As a transnational minority, they should as far as possible be able to meet with family and friends in other countries. Most likely, this situation will be eased when free movement according to the present regulations of the EU are also open to accession countries.

While there are cases where Roma exploit the social welfare system, this does not constitute the overall picture.

In cases of asylum applications of Roma, we recommend that each case be examined on its own merits. As churches, we agree that discrimination and poverty alone are not sufficient reasons to grant asylum. However, there are cases in which discrimination and harassment lead to persecution in a specific place or region. While at present no country is persecuting Roma, some countries may not yet provide sufficient protection from persecution by other groups in society. Therefore it is of utmost importance to consider each case carefully.

Repatriation of Roma to their country of origin should take into account family ties, and reintegration programmes would help to create stable conditions. These programmes need to take into account how long the persons have been away from the region to which they are returning, and provide adequate assistance. Churches could offer special assistance particularly for minor children and women when they are returned after having been trafficked and ended up in prostitution or crime. In this regard, co-operation of churches in the respective countries should be established to find the best solutions for the persons.

CEC and CCME are being asked to continue working on consultations on Roma issues

## **6. Political field**

Participation in decision-making processes at local, regional and national European levels for Roma should be improved. More efforts should be undertaken to enable Roma to advocate and lobby for their own rights. Churches could support these efforts by advocating on their behalf or supporting their demands.

Models of conflict resolution should be elaborated and local authorities be asked to support these.

As the new EU anti-discrimination legislation will also be implemented in many Central and East European countries, the governments should be asked to implement these provisions in consultation with minority groups. The churches can play an active role by offering to monitor the situation, as well as in assisting victims of discrimination in demanding redress. Churches should actively cooperate with the bodies which will be set up to monitor discrimination.

Particularly in the EU accession countries, the governments will be called upon to elaborate and implement middle and long-term concepts and measures for the economic, political, cultural, educational and social equality of Roma citizens.

As Roma are a minority not only in the accession countries but across Europe, the European Commission will be requested to do more work on the issue of anti-Roma prejudice among the majority population in European societies, developing models of education for the majority to overcome prejudice. Such endeavours should be applicable to present and future EU member states, so that divisions and fears can be overcome. The reproach sometimes made to EU accession countries, that freedom of movement, one of the main concepts of the European Union, would be endangered by Roma movements, is a threat that needs to be avoided, and integration into the EU has to be approached more positively in this sphere, too.

Christian Churches are committed to building a human community based on justice, equal human rights and equal opportunities. They envisage a community which is free from fear and from eruptions of xenophobia, racism and violence; a community which

leaves space for and respects different traditions and cultures, as they believe that each person is created in the image of God.