

ANNUAL REPORT 2015

INTRODUCTION

Religions for Peace Europe (RfP Europe) is an inter-faith body affiliated to Religions for Peace International (RfPI) which is the world's largest and most representative multi-religious coalition advancing common action for peace by working to foster multi-religious consensus on positive aspects of peace as well as concrete actions to stop war, help eliminate extreme poverty and protect the earth. It is the world's largest partnership between different religions pursuing planetary peace, starting from within one's soul. While remaining true to their individual belief systems, the members of this global coalition commit themselves to working together towards lasting peace on earth enjoyed by all.

Since its founding in 1970 RfP Europe has been guided by the vision of a world in which religious communities co-operate effectively for peace by taking concrete common action. Its mission is to bring together different religious people, communities and organisations to uphold lasting peace, which can be enjoyed by all.



United in their belief about the precious value of every human life and nature, and in the universal values that they all share, RfP Europe wishes to empower people at all levels to make a unique faith-based contribution to peace in collaboration with other actors in civil society and the European Institutions. This renewed vision emerged from a process of reflection that RfP Europe implemented in 2015 involving religious communities, individual people of faith and experts on various issues related to peace building.

For RfP Europe, peace is the spiritual centre of human life and for believers, it is a gift of the Divine. It is the bond that creates community among human beings, bringing about mutual

respect for upholding the sacredness of life and all life-support systems that the earth and our natural environment provide. In receiving this Divine Gift, we take on a mission to share that gift with the whole world.

Our organization has had the opportunity to intervene in formal and informal ways in a variety of European meetings (around 20) where it has contributed an interfaith perspective on different themes and issues discussed: media and religion, the role of women in society, round tables on active citizenship, religions and human rights, freedom of religions and others.

In the present report we include the main activities implemented at a regional level. The different entities (European Council of Religious Leaders, the Women of Faith Network and the Youth Interfaith Network) as well as the Chapters and Interreligious National Councils have implemented many other activities and have their own reports.

MAIN ACTIVITIES

“WELCOMING EACH OTHER IN EUROPE: A CALL TO NON-DISCRIMINATION”

Participants coming from fourteen European countries gathered in Brussels from 18 to 21 March 2015 to reflect and share their best practices around the project “Welcoming each other in Europe: a call to non-discrimination”. The meetings were organized by Religions for Peace Europe (RfPEU) in collaboration with the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC) and brought together prominent personalities from the major religious communities, religious leaders, women, children and youth.

The gatherings in Brussels were part of a series of interfaith encounters, set up by Religions for Peace Europe in the framework of its RfPEU Programme 2014-2015; on « Welcoming each other in Europe: a call to non-discrimination ». The one-year plan started in September 2014 with a strategic planning meeting where participants decided to join the project and expand it to other countries with a focus on ethnic and religious discrimination. After six months of implementation, representatives from



14 countries met and designed strategies for the next six months until the RfP Europe Assembly that took place in Castel Gandolfo, Italy, at the end of October 2015. Participants were very pleased with the one-day event at the European Parliament and the dialogue with Ms. Katharina von Schnurbein. They manifested their hope that effective collaboration with the European Institutions would continue and religions as well as faith based organizations, leaders and grassroots initiatives would have the platform and support they deserve.

LIVE BUILDING PROCESS DAY AT THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT



On 19 March 2015, 120 people including eminent religious leaders, women, youth and children, together with experts in various fields, participated in an important event that took place at the European Parliament in Brussels. This event was hosted by Mrs. Anna Zaborska, MEP; Mr. Borislav Škripek, MEP, the European Intergroup of Freedom of Religions or Beliefs and Religious Tolerance. This full day spent at the EU Institutions, gave delegations the opportunity to act as participative European citizens. They took part in round tables, met decision makers and got new skills on inter-faith work.

The meeting offered young delegates a unique opportunity to experience the value of the European process, through participation in various round tables, meeting with EU representatives and members of the European Parliament. The Live Building Process Day aimed at witnessing and fostering a peace building process across Europe, where religions play an important role, articulating the contribution of the various delegations coming from Albania, Belgium, Bosnia Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Finland, France, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. Through participatory methodologies and considering each participant as a peace builder, participants could try out new strategies for non-discrimination to take back to their own countries.



<http://www.religionsforpeace-europe.org/media/videos/eu-day-19-march-2015-peace-building-process/>

INTERFAITH CHANTING FOR UNITY AND PEACE

A high moment on 19 March was the participation in a Chanting ceremony organized by Religions for Peace Europe with the important collaboration of Father Peter Baekelmans, in the Church of the Dominicans in Brussels.

The beautiful music and sung prayers from the Community of Taizé (group from the KU Leuven University Chaplaincy), the Sufi group of the



International Alawiyya Sufi Association and the Siddha Yoga group of the Academy of Sadhana vzw came together in an atmosphere of great harmony. The 120 participants were touched by the beauty of the peace prayers and joined in the singing. The whole celebration was a tangible symbol of wonderful unity.

<http://www.religionsforpeace-europe.org/media/videos/inner-peace-chanting-19-march-2015/>

RfP EUROPE ASSEMBLY 2015

The Religions for Peace European Assembly 2015, took place at Castel Gandolfo, Italy, on 28 October - 1 November 2015, and gathered 290 faith and religious people, leaders, women and youth from 28 countries and ten different religious communities and faith traditions. The venue was the Mariapolis Center of the Focolare Movement in an atmosphere of peace and deep spirituality.



The Assembly theme “Welcoming each other in Europe: From Fear to Trust”, enabled participants to reflect on one of the crucial issues that Europe is facing today. Fears are spreading throughout the different nations of the continent: anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and the waves of refugees cause fears on many sides. Religious communities are encouraged to act in cooperation with all people of good will.

The theme was addressed in three sub-sections: inner peace, freedom of expression and protecting the most vulnerable. Experts, religious leaders, young people, women, all were urged to become more aware of how each one’s each contribution was vital to reach the goal of this encounter. This was implemented through a programme articulated in three steps: a plenary session with panels involving a variety of voices from religious people, experts and also people directly affected by the main problems Europe is facing today; followed up by a variety of workshops where the participants deepened their reflexions on the issues and prepared recommendations for future action; and back in plenary again where reports and

recommendations were presented as outcomes of the participants' contributions during the workshops followed by sharing of examples of best practice.

The Assembly reinforced the feeling of belonging to: "different faiths and common aspiration to become more proactive to contribute to a united family". "It was like a forum, a spiritual market where people come and go and expressed their ideas, worries and wishes".

Through sharing reflexions, best practice in small groups and plenaries, participants listened to important and effective action religious people and communities are taking in order to contribute to a more welcoming society in Europe. These experiences included participation in dialogue between communities and with political leaders and authorities, advocating for the rights of the excluded, training opportunities for young people, solidarity with migrants and refugees, empowering of women, using sport and art to promote peace, alternative respectful ways to communicate, inner spirituality as a contribution to peace and others. They affirmed the importance to give visibility to these positive actions and work closely together and with other social and political actors in society for being more effective in contributing to real peace based on respect, justice and solidarity.



Two young people,
one Muslim, one Jewish

What was brought home: Peace depends on each of us; concrete action as well as advocacy are needed. Politicians realised they need religious communities to play their part in creating a more peaceful and harmonious society.

What was learned: dialogue - not only intellectual, but with our heads, our hearts and our feet is essential in our living together

News ways of methodologies shared: using sport, music, art and other action. Many examples were presented in this assembly, especially of working for the refugees and marginalized in our societies.

Working for the well-being of all people in accordance with the Golden Rule, by:

- Encouraging our religious communities to reject and work against all forms of extremism, fundamentalism and the misuse of Holy Scriptures and Traditions in our own or other communities
- Creating a welcoming atmosphere and stand up against those who oppose it.
- Building trust through personal encounter and through coalitions with communal agencies at the European, the national and the local level
- Involving young people, trusting them, offering them space for leadership and encouraging them in their efforts to stand together against all prejudices, learning from the commitment and hope they have demonstrated
- Advocating the rights and dignity of the "vulnerable " before local, national and European authorities, both religious and political, public opinion and media

- Using the spiritual patrimony of our religious traditions for the empowerment of our communities
- Engaging ourselves in the necessary educational and learning processes

- Finding imaginative ways to assist all who live in need and in areas of political tension and humanitarian crisis.

In responding to the present refugee and migration crisis, religious people and communities are urged to:

- Serve the poorest and create common projects for providing food, with care to include a range of communities, religions and cultures
- Encourage asylum seekers (from different cultures and religions) to visit elderly people, creating connections and enhancing spirituality (example from Finland and Sweden)
- Organize local charity and hospitality as our scriptures exhort us to, through common action and following good examples
- Create networks using social media or web applications to increase inclusiveness, prevent loneliness, sharing love through digital means such as writing prayers, hymns, memories, music
- Organize festivals and concerts, with chanting, prayers, interaction
- Integrate children coming from Syria and elsewhere, and of different faiths into our society, with strong manifestations of love (example from Albania).

“EMPOWERING YOUTH FOR INTERFAITH AND MULTICULTURAL PEACE ACTION”



An International Youth Training Seminar took place in parallel with the RfP Europe Assembly “Empowering Youth for Interfaith and Multicultural Peace Action”, from 27 October to 2 November in Castel Gandolfo, Italy. This Youth Exchange, supported by Erasmus+ and other sponsors, brought together 54 young people and facilitators from 12 European countries and 8 religious communities and non-believers. They participated in some of the Assembly activities and presented a report in a special youth plenary session with recommendations.



“Empowering Youth in Interfaith and Multicultural Peace Action” aimed to empower young people of faith and other interested young people providing them with interfaith and multicultural tools for preventing and eliminating xenophobia and intolerance. The project responded to the problem of growing intolerance over religion and religious expression, which is endangering societies in Europe. The youth exchange responded to the lack of awareness of key concepts of a culture of peace, lack of information about other faiths and religions, and lack of knowledge about other cultures. This is manifested in hate-speech or discriminatory speech or action often involving young people.

There were eight workshops and panel discussions led by the participating organizations on the following topics: Cultural and Spiritual Values and Religious Inheritances that Unite us in Europe; Coming Closer to the Needs and Feelings of the Other; Building a Culture of Peace; Organizations’ Good Practice in Peace Building and Non-Discrimination; Building Partnership and Funding Opportunities; Art, a Contribution to Peace, Inspiration and Creativity; Formation of Youth Citizen Reporters; Changing our way of thinking towards a holistic approach for contributing to peace.

Through the workshops participants gained the following experience:

Capacity to show empathy and to understand the needs and feelings of other young persons and people in general; awareness of the causes of racism and xenophobia; new knowledge and understanding of different cultures/faiths and increased capacity to respond to concrete



situations of intolerance and xenophobia; fundraising and capacity to conduct information campaigns and youth activities; ability to share with other young people in their communities and organizations and strengthen the network; capacity to respect and understand cultural and religious differences in networking; expand their horizons, strengthen confidence in youth engagement, and help overcome some of the challenges young people are facing;

communicational tools for disseminating their activities and project results based upon ethical values; ability to offer genuine assistance to others.

<http://www.religionsforpeace-europe.org/media/videos/youth-interfaith-exchange-supported-by-erasmus-2015/>

ACTION TO BUILD – STRENGTHENING AND BUILDING PARTNERSHIP

Besides searching for funding support, RfP Europe has further strengthened contacts, and holds partnership discussions with governments, EU institutions, and European associations.

Through its work RfP Europe has

- Strengthened ties with the EU institutions
- Participated in the European agenda by taking part in a variety of different EU meetings
- Implemented action in favour of dialogue, coexistence, mutual understanding, mutual inclusiveness and self mediation
- Participated in a consultative process to introduce a document at an EU level Consultation on “Tolerance and respect: preventing and combating anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim hatred in Europe”

In building partnership RfP Europe believes that love and compassion must be at the centre of the peace process. Words and action must be in full harmony, creating friendship and manifesting mutual recognition for the work done in the field.

FINAL REMARKS

It is important to adopt, testify for and educate for an open-minded approach by building bridges, reinforcing links of confidence, trust and friendship between individuals, communities, and all people to generate together a fraternal society.



It is vital to support the work of young people and women, strong peace builders, and disseminate their action. One priority for RfP Europe is to value the work in the National Chapters and encourage them to establish connections for reinforcing their relationships with religious leaders, women and interreligious associations.

The mission of RfP Europe has been possible thanks to the great contributions from religious leaders, young people and women, NGOs working on peace issues, a network of volunteers and the European Union Institutions. Our gratitude goes to all of them. We continue in the hope that we may all be effective instruments for peace and reconciliation. With the deep desire that all who feel marginalized be embraced in love and compassion and will find their place in our communities and society.

Yolande Iliano
RfP Europe President
January 2016