

Conviviality conference in Liepaja, Latvia

From the 8.-9th of May the Diaconal center Liepaja together with the responsible bishop for diakonia in the Ev. Luth. Church in Latvia Einārs Alpe organized a seminar “On the way to conviviality – new approaches to congregational diakonia.

The participants arrived from seven different places in Latvia, representing their own local diakonia and their regional district. Altogether we were 26 participants. At the beginning, Martin Urdze, the leader of the Diaconal Centre Liepaja and member of the LWF Solidarity Group, read a Word of greeting from the LWF Europe Secretary Eva Vogel-Mfato. Afterwards he gave a small introduction into the conviviality process. Diaconal work is not only offering help for those in need, it is connected with the ministry of the whole congregation and with the relationship between its' members. Diaconal work is characterized by the value of every human being as Jesus has shown it in his own ministry. The word “conviviality” is an appropriate term to describe the main task of diakonia – that is the friendship of different human beings, who give each other mutual support, share their gifts and means, defend themselves from enemies, solve common problems and celebrate together. Martin Urdze presented a model from the philosopher and theologian Peter Rollins how people relate to different worldviews than their own. It is possible to consume the other, to vomit him or her out, to tolerate, to agree with the other or to try to listen in a very attentive and careful way and look at ourselves with the eyes of the other. Conviviality is about the way we form relationships that are not based on power, but on service, friendship and understanding. Everybody can be taker and giver.

In the evening we enjoyed conviviality by playing games, singing songs and listen to a small concert provided by Karina Krievina, one active member of the Diaconal Centre.

Next morning we started early with different presentations from members of the Cross congregation in Liepaja. The Cross congregation understands itself as a diaconal congregation, that means that diakonia is a task of the whole congregation, not only a branch with certain specialists. The presentations were about the worship, Sunday school, the choir “Ad aspera”, a group called “Talks about Bible and Life”, the work with people with disabilities, including the handicraft groups and the Domino market, help for Ukraine, the Open Church project, the distribution of humanitarian help, cooperation with other NGO's self-help groups, and the Apple Festival.

Afterwards, the participants split into five groups that reflected on the different presentations and used them as a mirror to look on their own work in their home congregations. In the afternoon, we identified some common problems, e.g. burnout of diaconal workers, the lack of engagement and motivation, injustice in society, not enough training opportunities. Again, we divided into different groups to share ideas how to solve these problems and to work on concrete projects. There were following results:

- The need to develop a training program for diaconal workers that gives some theoretical background and is very practical at the same time
- Some ideas how to support people in the Ukraine: e.g. partner congregations and contacts between Sunday school children
- The organization of a conviviality day in every church district of the Latvian Ev. Luth. Church. It is planned that conviviality conferences will be held at different places on a regular basis.
- A conference about poverty in Latvia.

In the evening, we had a common worship in the Church of the Cross where Bishop Alpe

gave an award to our German friends Herbert and Gisela Rocksien, two supporters of the Diaconal Centre in Liepaja who have organized 39 transports with humanitarian help over more than 15 years. The conference ended with a common meal where we had the opportunity to be together in a joyful spirit praising God for the gifts he gives to us.

A big thank you to the Lutheran World Federation for supporting this conference!

Martin Urdze
Liepaja, 03.06.2015