

## European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN) 9<sup>th</sup> Assembly, Elspeet - 29<sup>th</sup> August – 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2012

Some 98 participants from Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant churches from 22 countries met at the Mennorode Conferentie Centrum, Elspeet in the Netherlands for the 9<sup>th</sup> ECEN Assembly on the theme of **'Eco-Justice', Growth and Hope'**. The event was hosted by the Dutch Ecumenical Council of Churches and the Noah Alliance.



The context for this conference is that discussions about sustainability are not presently high on the political agenda, a viewpoint reflected in the disappointment in the outcomes from the recent Rio+ 20 Summit. Voices that ask the question *'Why?'* seem to be quiet. *Why* should we earn more money? *Why* do we believe that more money makes us happier? *Why* do the richest 20% of the population on earth consume 16 times more than the worlds poorest 20%?



The programme included speakers Professors Hans Opschoor, member of the UN Committee on Development Policy, and Hans Diefenbacher from FEST (Heidelberg), Revd. Dave Bookless (A Rocha International) and Rabbi Awraham Soetendorp, Earth Charter Commissioner. In particular, the rabbi underlined the necessity of acting together across faith traditions and beliefs in the healing of Creation (TIKKUN OLAM).



The main content of the discussions explored the very real tensions between a culture demanding infinite economic growth that is dependent on a planet with finite resources. Across Europe and beyond, people face environmental destruction on an unprecedented scale – climate change, loss of biodiversity, declining natural resources and toxic contamination. Economically, much of the world is unstable and uncertain, and the gaps between rich and poor wider than ever. Serious questions were asked about the value of narrow-based measures of economic progress such as GDP.

Rabbi Awraham Soetendorp mentioned in his lecture the idea of the body as a well-known image to express the relatedness of creatures to each other. If one part of the body aches, the whole body is in pain. But what if you no longer feel the pain of the other parts of the body? “That means that you don’t live anymore”, he concluded. How do we treat our mother, the earth? Do we recognise her as a living creature? Or is she no more than a number of sources for energy, rocks, minerals?



In the face of such immense challenges, the Christian churches are invited to respond in hope and faith. The Assembly therefore affirmed that hopeful action must be the guiding principle in responding to such multiple concerns, since hubris and passive despair are seen as contradicting the will of a God of love and justice.

Participants met with members of local churches and visited church environmental projects in the Netherlands. These included a wind energy cooperative, an organic farm and a solar-powered church. There were also significant contributions of examples demonstrating different lifestyles for the future. For instance, the Transition Movement was seen as a positive sign of hope as we move away from a dependency on ‘oil’ towards a renewed dependency on ‘soil’.



This Assembly coincided with the beginning of the Season of Creation, which has always been a major emphasis for the European Network. So as with all ECEN gatherings, those present engaged in a variety of styles of worship and reflection – including an Orthodox litany, ‘Cosmic Walk’ and reflections on the Lord’s Prayer through art. For the opening service, delegates were invited to bring some water from their own countries, indicating some of the risks we face with fresh water supplies. These were collected in a bowl and taken to be poured into the baptismal pool at the local protestant church for the closing liturgy.



ECEN continues to support and pursue its work through a number of Working Groups, which met at Elspeet. These have been Climate Change, Creation Time, Eco-Management, Theology, Transition Lifestyles and Biodiversity. Revised groups on Education for Sustainability and Water are also being explored.



The main outcome of the event, alongside the vital networking, support and encouragement for those working on ecological issues across our European churches, was a concluding statement calling for church engagement with a “green economy” or “economy of care”. This suggests a stronger need to work as advocates of change, especially with the institutions of Europe.

The Assembly called on Christian churches to take a lead in these matters. The world financial crisis is leading to growing economic problems. Unequal access to resources generates greater injustice internationally and within nations and regions. The capacity of the Earth to sustain abundant life is increasingly under threat. Therefore the need to change current patterns of resource production and consumption, and human lifestyle is paramount, with a renewed vigour to create a more sustainable and fair society.

The final words of this call outline this priority: *“We therefore commit ourselves to greater attentiveness to the ways we live our lives. As our ancestors have taught us, actions are the worldly signs of our hope, of our hope found in the resurrected Christ, in whose name the nations will put their hope”.*



Copies of the full statement are available on the ECEN website: [www.ecen.org](http://www.ecen.org)



**Martyn Goss (Church of England delegate), Exeter, UK. 4<sup>th</sup> September 2012**

*European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN) is a church network promoting co-operation in caring for creation. ECEN is an instrument of the Conference of European Churches in cooperation with the European Catholic Bishops' Conference, for addressing the relationship to nature and the environment from the perspective of Christian theology and Christian way of life.*