

North American Seminarians Speak of Changed Perspectives after Geneva Ecumenism Course

GENEVA, 26 January 2007 (LWI) - "Ecumenism involves learning to work through the scrapes and bruises. We are changed agents in the church, but what that means will involve a long process." Adam Dichsen of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Illinois, USA, made these remarks in a group discussion following a two-week study tour to church organizations based at the Ecumenical Center in Geneva, Switzerland, including the Lutheran World Federation (LWF).

He was among a group of over 20 students from seminaries of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) who participated in the 7-19 January third annual course on "The Ecumenical Church in a Globalized World." The course's overall objective is to develop a deeper appreciation of what it means to be part of a global communion of churches within an ecumenical and global context, and to analyze the overall implications for ministry especially in the North American contexts.

Participants, ranging in age from 20 to mid-60s, spent most of their days in discussion forums with staff persons from the LWF, World Council of Churches (WCC), World Alliance of Reformed Churches and the Conference of European Churches, among others.

Presentations and discussions focused on current ecumenical dialogues and the future of the ecumenical movement, on social, economic and political issues including globalization, as well as interfaith and intercultural challenges.

The students expressed appreciation not only for the subjects' content but also for the challenges of listening to and interacting with people whose life experiences and realities were different from their own. As Rev. Dr Martin Robra, WCC program executive for ethics and ecology pointed out in one of the sessions, "ecumenism is God's one story, but with particular stories that need to be woven together."

Patricia Payne from the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, who has worked for several years in state government, said she "became even more alarmed about the impact of neo-liberal globalization, and the difficulty in holding multinational corporations accountable."

The North American students also spent a day with students from different churches and cultures at the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey, and visited the United Nations Geneva offices.

The course co-ordinator, Rev. Dr Karen Bloomquist, director of the LWF Department for Theology and Studies (DTS) stressed the importance of the learning process for seminarians not only in North America but throughout the global Lutheran communion. She referred to a message received from Susan Williamson, a student in the 2005 course, who said: "I cherish what I gained in Geneva ... when I am ordained in February, I will be designating the offering for the LWF. Rural America will continue to learn about the LWF as long as I serve there."

The DTS director said she hoped funds could be secured to enable a number of students from the global South to participate in the course next year. Dr Michael R. Trice, associate director, ELCA Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations, co-organized the program. A teaching team comprising Dr Paul Chung (Wartburg Theological Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa), Rev. Jessica Crist (ELCA Montana Synod), Rev. William Strehlow (Geneva-based pastor) and Rev. Debra Wells (Luther Seminary, St Paul, Minnesota) also accompanied the group.