

The coordination of the churches prior to AIDS 2010

By Jochen Kramm.

The year 2010 represents a milestone in international relations to HIV/Aids: many leading figures have committed themselves to ensuring that by this date there is world-wide access to educational work, the treatment of the illness and the support of those afflicted with it. The stocktaking will be made in July 2010 in Vienna, where from 18 to 23 July 2010 the 18th International Aids Conference is taking place. It will be a great event in which an estimated 25'000 participants and 2'500 journalists will be involved. However, within this framework the churches have been allowed little space to present themselves. Therefore the ecumenical network Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance has taken steps to arrange a separate conference for religious organizations before the main conference. At present a one-day conference with about 250 people is being planned for 2010. The Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance is an international network of churches and associations of various confessions close to the church which are carrying on campaigns on common causes. It is based at the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva, next to the WCC.

It is no coincidence that Vienna is the location for AIDS 2010, since the organizers hope for a strong participation from Eastern Europe, the present hot bed of new infections. The states of the former Soviet Union, the Ukraine and the Baltic states show disturbing statistics for the spread of the virus. The percentage increase there is the highest in the world. Vienna is meant to provide stimuli for this region. The Community of Protestant Churches in Europe has member churches in all the above-mentioned states. Even if they are in the minority there, they are directly affected by the consequences of a rising rate of infection. Therefore a member of the office will collaborate in the preparation of the conference for religious organizations. The Protestant churches of Europe are networked in many ways by their agencies and associations, but they have no common agreed position on the HIV pandemic. This is a difficult starting point for drawing attention to a European Protestant voice in this media concert. The discussion could only be enriched by such a contribution, since we may conjecture that there are still confessional differences in questions of sexual ethics and thus in the avoidance of infection.

AIDS 2010 could offer a platform for all Protestant forces involved in questions of HIV and Aids in Europe to take note of one another and coordinate their activities. It could help to overcome the reservations of the Aids activists and non-governmental organizations against church activities in this sphere. Moreover a debate about the interpretation of the pandemic

among Christians – indeed among Protestants – is still necessary. The stemming of this illness is bound up with ethical questions. Protestant solidarity is needed to make it possible for delegates from eastern Europe to visit the conference, and also to develop a degree of competence in reacting to the threat among the minorities. It could be a place where the confessions and perhaps also the religions could encourage and enrich one another through spiritual support for those infected.

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