

Annual Reports
European Council of Religious Leaders
Budapest 2018

European Council of Religious Leaders



President Revd. Dr Thomas Wipf Annual Report May 2017-18

The European Council of Religious Leaders

Thoughts on our calling: “In the world, but not of the world”

Our deeply-rooted religious traditions inspire and guide our lives.

This directs the course of our lives above and beyond our immediate existence – by lending us hope and faith, allowing us to lament and seek consolation, empowering us and calming our souls.

We are all bound together by this deeper dimension, our faith and our belief.

It is this perceived common foundation that gives us hope and encourages us to approach our fellow humans with respect, an open heart and active love.

Our common faith – in its different forms and traditions – transcends ourselves and our world. We sense and know that there is more to life than what we can simply see and our immediate ties to this Earth and its realities.

We can say that we live *in* this world, but are not *of* this world.

The inviolable dignity of every human is not bestowed by other people, but derives from divine creation.

This is the one side to our existence.

The other side, also an intrinsic element, is that as humans we live *in* this world and are a part of it. We live in this world’s circumstances as they affect our existence and everyday lives.

This also calls upon us to live according to our beliefs and overriding principles and to share them with others, whatever circumstances we face.

As members of religious communities, we are not simply observers of the world and what goes on here. We also help to shape it – as individuals and as religious communities. We are part of this world.

Every religious tradition calls upon people to act. We are all expected to do our utmost to ensure everyone co-exists peacefully and fairly and to sustain creation.

“Religions *for Peace*” spells this out. Religions and their members share a common and comprehensive mission to propagate peace.

This peace stems from inside us and is in our hearts and thoughts. But it should also have an effect upon reality and the way the world is structured.

Many projects conducted by our Religions for Peace family all over the world demonstrate how we can actively propagate peace:

...By supporting the UN's global campaigns with declarations such as "Shared well-being: Multi-religious values for sustainable development goals / SDGs" and "A multi-religious call for action on climate change".

...Opposing nuclear weapons in partnership with the "International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons"

...Or joining the "Interfaith Rainforest Initiative" instigated by various partners in politics, science and religious communities, mainly from Norway.

Social and political developments

The ECRL is also expected to fulfil the mandate of "Different Faiths – Common Action". This entails monitoring social and political developments to ensure that our message of peace and reconciliation can be heard and has an effect.

We are not merely observers of this world, but also help shape it.

The current-day situation seems to be moving more and more towards extremes at many levels.

The tone of political debate is more frequently aggressive these days. Efforts to understand one another and a willingness to compromise between different interests and points of view are becoming increasingly arduous. Hardline, intransigent stances are considered a strength, and a certain fascination in authoritarian structures is evident.

Perhaps this is a result of the very rapid and fundamental changes caused by the phenomenon of globalisation. Information, knowledge, financial transactions, travel and entertainment now freely cross borders, but many people are left by the wayside.

Their response can be to retreat to the solid, familiar ground provided by their own culture, nation and social group. However important people's roots in their own identity are, and however much this fulfils a human need for a sense of belonging, it cannot be allowed to feed off exclusion and denigrating any kind of difference or "foreignness".

My point is that members and officers of religious communities like ourselves must be alert to these kinds of developments.

Mutual esteem, respect for differences and a genuine interest in one another should lead us to stand up for fair play, truth and a culture of listening and discussion – to promote genuine debate without hidden self-serving interests.

What a strong, motivating signal we could send out to society and politics by standing together to highlight ideas and examples of seeking dialogue and showing genuine interest and respect, rather than merely tolerating one another.

I am certain that religions could contribute even more effectively to reconciliation and peace by working together both genuinely and wholeheartedly.

Far too often, we remain wrapped up in our own concerns – attending to our own particular challenges, organisational issues and internal clashes between different religious currents.

The Religions for Peace network creates places and opportunities for encounters all over the world where we embody and can put our joint effort towards humanity, justice, respect and peace into action.

This also boosts our immunity against the risk of religion being misused for political, nationalist or ideological aims.

Religions and religious leaders must resist being instrumentalised in the name of political, nationalist or ideological interests.

Even when it comes to conflicts between religions – some of them extremely harsh, relentless and historically entrenched – we should demonstrate that we can live with differences and pluralism. In fact, this is precisely how we can learn and benefit from one another in a way that helps us to grow in our own belief.

The ECRL during 2017

2017 was a year marked by intensive efforts, also on my own part as President, towards creating a new and solid basis for the ECRL.

The Annual Meeting in Turku, hosted by the Lutheran Church of Finland, drew upon Simon Keyes' inspiring report on potential future lines of development for the ECRL – “An Agenda for Change” – to agree several fundamental amendments.

I would like to reiterate the key goals for re-aligning and clarifying the ECRL's position and identity in relation to RfP International:

- a) To complete the ECRL's registration in Brussels and establish a presence there;
- b) To separate the ECRL from Religions for Peace Europe and position it as an independent organisation of senior religious leaders with a pan-European vision and influence;
- c) To re-establish ECRL's direct affiliation with RfP International.

The meeting summed up its discussions in Turku in the statement “Thinking and Acting Together: Migration, Human Security and Multi-Faith Action”.

One of our guest speakers, Kishan Manocha, Senior Advisor on Freedom of Religion and Belief at OSCE/ODIHR, spoke about several issues and challenges that he believes the ECRL must urgently address. These fall under the headings “Pluralisation of religion and belief and the challenges of religious freedom”, “Rethinking religion” and “Religion and human rights”.

With regard to overhauling and invigorating the ECRL, the Secretary General and the President have been working hard to encourage the Vice Presidents in charge of the six clusters to seek and propose new members to represent their religious traditions. The success of these efforts has varied, but we are very thankful for every new member of the ECRL and everyone who agrees to play an active role.

A lot is happening in the ECRL. The Secretary General will explain in more detail in his own report.

I would like to thank all the members of the Council and the Executive Committee for their efforts, but above all our Secretary General, Dr Mark Owen, and Rebecca Bellamy, the skilful Secretariat Manager.

We are also very grateful for the guidance provided by the University of Winchester in the UK, which lends its staff to the ECRL and provides us with an academic and organisational home.

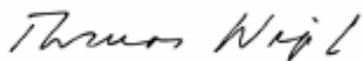
The ECRL is entirely dependent upon this support and the voluntary work of everyone concerned.

The financial situation is extremely precarious. We sincerely appreciate the support that we have received from the Lutheran Church of Finland in hosting the 2017 Annual Meeting and also contributing funds. We are also grateful for the support provided by the Evangelical Church in Germany and several members. This includes the invitation from the Islamic Community in Slovenia to hold our Executive Committee meeting in Ljubljana this March.

However, if no long-term funding solution can be found, the ECRL will potentially be forced to give up its work.

“If the unique and representative platform of the ECRL didn’t exist in Europe, we would have invent it at once,” is the message that we have also heard in Brussels on several occasions.

Will we continue in future to make the most of this chance to channel our inter-religious collaboration into vital and beneficial service towards peace and understanding in Europe and as part of the global Religions for Peace community?



Revd. Dr Thomas Wipf
President – European Council of Religious Leaders

Secretary General Dr Mark Owen Annual Report May 2017-18

The European Council of Religious Leaders

As Secretary General I am pleased to report that throughout 2017-18 the European Council of Religious Leaders has been working determinedly towards building just and harmonious societies in Europe and beyond through a number of key initiatives:

1. Religion and Migration in Europe

Since ECRL's 2016 annual meeting in Brixen, Italy, and subsequent commitment to contribute positively to the integration experience of migrants, refugees and host communities, ECRL has worked on a number of initiatives related to migration. ECRL has:

- Disseminated a declaration and guidance on the roles and responsibilities of religious leaders and communities in welcoming migrants, whilst simultaneously recognizing and addressing the very real concerns some host communities might have about the impact of migration.
- Commissioned a joint research project with the University of Winchester's 'Centre of Religion, Reconciliation and Peace' to examine the advantages of multi-religious approaches to integration.
- Hosted a one day seminar in Brussels (In partnership with the State of Hessen) in bringing together academics, practitioners and policy makers from across Europe to examine the role of religion in the mass movement of migrants from outside Europe into European countries, and attendant integration processes.
- Contributed to a policy paper on Religion and Migration which went forward to the 2017 G20 meeting in Hamburg.
- Engaged with a number of secular and religious organizations and institutions at seminars and conferences on the subject of religion and migration.

Evidently migration remains hugely relevant in contemporary Europe, and ECRL will continue to pursue opportunities to have a positive impact on this important issue.

2. Religion and State Constitutions

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) approached the European Council of Religious Leaders ECRL in 2017 with the view to carrying out a project that examines which political and constitutional models are seen most favourably by religious communities and best help prevent contradictions and tensions between politics, law and freedom of religious practice and belief. As a result ECRL agreed to be a full partner in the 'Religious Perspectives on Constitutional Values Programme', which will take the form of a series of intra and interfaith dialogues and a consultation process. The project officially launched in March 2018 in the Netherlands. The primary aims of the programme are to:

- Create a safe and stimulating space where religious leaders can develop their knowledge and understanding of constitutional models and frameworks;
- Enhance understandings of how different approaches to constitutional freedoms are perceived by a diversity of religious leaders and communities, and how they might impact on freedom of religion and belief;

- Develop greater understanding of the divergence and consensus between a variety of different religions on constitutional freedoms and frameworks.
- Produce a much needed report of the intra and interfaith dialogue processes, and resulting findings and conclusions.

This is an extremely important initiative for ECRL, and enables the Council to showcase their status as *the* premiere consultative multi-religious body in Europe. As Sec Gen I would humbly request that the Council offer their full support, and when possible and necessary their time, to engage in this significant project and process.

3. Multi-religious Co-operation on Security and Community Cohesion

ECRL draws on the spiritual, ethical and moral wisdom and resources of the world's great religious traditions and leaders in order to support the building of peace, social harmony and security throughout Europe and the wider world. In Hungary the council will discuss the important role of multi-religious cooperation in social cohesion and human security.

The ECRL symposium programmed as part of the ECRL annual meeting, will explore how religion might support and enhance efforts to break down negative stereotypes, create unanimity where deep division currently exists, and contributing to safe, peaceful and cohesive societies and communities in Europe today. Again this theme is of huge contemporary relevance, and this symposium will assist the strategic development of one of ECRL's priority areas, and help establish the Council's position on this important topic.

4. External Partners and Engagement

On behalf of the Council the President, Secretary General and Secretariat continue to do their best (with limited resources) to represent ECRL at a wide variety of events, and when called upon by external networks and organisations. In line with our most recent strategy, the Secretariat has also attempted to offer more opportunities to ECRL members to represent the Council at a variety of meetings and consultations. In 2017-18 members have contributed to discussions on migration, freedom of religion and belief and Genocide prevention, amongst others.

5. Additional Activities of Secretariat

In addition to the planning and delivery of the programme areas above, additional activities include:

- ECRL has now agreed its new strategy for 2017-2020, which guides the organisations' priority areas and development in the coming years. The Strategy was drafted through consultation with ECRL members 2016-2017, discussed in detail at the annual meeting in Turku, Finland 2017, before being confirmed by the Ex-Comm in 2017.
- New information material is continuing to be designed, to allow ECRL members to promote the value and services of ECRL.
- The organisation has re-located from Norway to Brussels; with the final stages of the registration process imminent. Guided and supported by pro-bono legal support.
- The Secretariat has negotiated, planned and prepared for meetings and conferences in collaboration with hosts, including Executive Committee meetings and annual ECRL Meetings/conferences.

The Spring 2018 Executive Committee of the European Council of Religious Leaders (ECRL) was hosted in Ljubljana on the 6 March, by Vice President Mufti Grabus of the Islamic Community in Slovenia. As well as the business meeting, the Executive Committee discussed the pressing legal and ethical issues regarding freedom and religion and belief and legal cases currently arising in Europe which challenge historical religious practices. The Executive Committee of ECRL were honoured to have a reception with the Mayor of Slovenia and to meet with leaders of the Orthodox, Muslim and Catholic communities of Ljubljana.

The Autumn 2017 Executive Committee meeting of the European Council of Religious Leaders (ECRL) was hosted by the Centre of Religion, Reconciliation and Peace, University of Winchester, UK. This meeting focussed on matters of business, including membership.

- The Secretariat evaluated the activity of the membership and has guided the nominations and re-elections process. Included in this re-registration process was a skills and expertise audit of ECRL members, so that the Secretariat could identify which members are willing to represent ECRL on specific issues. The Secretariat will now work towards securing funding to support members to represent ECRL at relevant and important events and meetings.
- Managing the ECRL budget.

As with most civil society organisations financial security and sustainability is arguably the greatest challenge. Identifying funding opportunities which do not compromise ECRL's core purposes remains a key priority for 2018-19.

- I am also pleased to inform ECRL members that the University of Winchester (UoW) has agreed to continue supporting ECRL through the provision of Secretariat Services (myself and Rebecca Bellamy), and through administrative resources. I would like to formally recognise the generosity of the Vice Chancellor and senior management in their continued support of ECRL.

6. Summary

As Secretary General I am grateful for this opportunity to thank all the ECRL members for their support, dedication and efforts in sustaining and developing the organisation, and helping ensure that ECRL can continue to make a positive and tangible contribution to overcoming many of the difficult challenges faced in Europe today. I would also like to personally thank President Thomas Wipf for his unwavering support; Thomas Flugge for his media expertise; and in particular Secretariat Manager Rebecca Bellamy, without whom ECRL simply could not function.

ECRL continues to operate on a very limited budget, and could not continue without the generous support of members. We convey huge thanks to our members who have over the last year donated as individuals or through their respective organisations, and/or in kind by supporting our meetings and activities.

Whilst serving ECRL is not without its challenges, it also gives me great satisfaction and honour to act as your Secretary General. I look forward to continuing to work for the Council and continuing to grow the capacity and reputation of the organisation in the coming year.



Dr Mark Owen
Secretary General – European Council of Religious Leaders