

# **DIFFERENT FAITHS – COMMON ACTION: A STRATEGY FOR EUROPEAN COUNCIL OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS**

**2013 - 2018**

## **1. European Council of Religious Leaders – Religions for Peace: Who we are**

### **Vision**

*Religious communities in Europe cooperate effectively for peace.*

### **Mission**

The European Council of Religious Leaders (ECRL) is “*a coalition of religious leaders in Europe who have committed themselves to cooperate on conflict prevention and transformation, peaceful coexistence and reconciliation, and who encourage members of their communities to do the same.*” (ECRL constitution § 1)

The ECRL Mission in summary: “*Different faiths – common action!*”

### **Identity**

ECRL brings together “*respected senior leaders of Europe’s historic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, together with leaders of great religious traditions with a shorter history in Europe*” (ECRL constitution § 2).

ECRL is part of the network of Religions for Peace in Europe, also consisting of:

- Religions for Peace bodies in 13 countries (inter-religious councils / chapters).
- European Women of Faith Network.
- European Interfaith Youth Network.
- Religions for Peace-Europe, a coordination mechanism for the different bodies.

ECRL is affiliated to Religions for Peace International - accredited to the United Nations – which is the world’s largest and most representative multi-religious coalition advancing common action for peace. Established in 1970, Religions for Peace is a network of national and regional Interreligious Councils (IRC) connected through an international World Council. The global organisation brings together around 90 national and 5 regional IRCs, the Global Women of Faith Network and Global Youth Network.

## **2. European Context and Challenges**

Over the last years there has been a significantly increasing ethnic, cultural and religious diversity. There seem to be two parallel trends for the role of religious developments. The plurality of religions in Western Europe is a quite new phenomenon in a great number of countries. Secularism and agnostic outlooks are at the same time expanding, and indifference towards religion seems widespread. Aggressive secularist efforts to remove any religious expressions from the public space are occasionally experienced. In Central and Eastern Europe the collapse of the communist period has led to a revival of religion, dominated by Orthodox Christian tradition and Islam. In some of these countries a trend of new legislation is limiting a growing religious pluralism through strict regulations. Religions which

migrated into Europe fairly recently are represented through minority groups that sometimes are facing challenges of integration. Pockets of right wing and religious extremism cause concerns. There are debates in many countries about how to deal with religion in the public sphere. Europe is an information society, and cultures are quickly influenced and made fluid. We all, religious communities, humanist and people of other beliefs have to face the challenge of overcoming intolerance, confusion, hate and extremism and of contributing to peaceful coexistence, mutual respect and reconciliation.

Every country and every person is intrinsically linked to each other. The information explosion, driven by cyber-based communication, has changed our way of inter-acting, and poses new opportunities for building networks across divides. The increasingly multicultural and multi-religious Europe calls for action to promote peace and fruitful co-living for people inside and outside its borders. People of good will must join hands! Religious people and organisations need to be part of this action to succeed, and initiatives across religious and secular divides are needed to respond properly.

### **3. ECRL's response to the challenges**

ECRL is a response to these calls. It is guided by the vision that *religious communities in Europe cooperate effectively for peace*.

Its members are guided by the three *principles*:

- Respect religious differences
- Act on deeply held and widely shared values
- Represent, informally or formally, concerns of a larger community.

ECRL builds on Religions for Peace's three *core strengths*:

- ECRL is multi-religious in nature, and is therefore a broad platform with impressive spiritual, moral social assets for common action. The Council is a credible and non-sectarian partner for authorities and other stakeholders in Europe.
- ECRL is part of the global Religions for Peace network that can operate simultaneously on different levels. The network has global, regional and national expressions.
- ECRL is formally or informally representative, making important links between its individual members and their communities and institutions

ECRL *engages in*

- Dialogue and cooperation as an end and value in itself
- Dialogue and cooperation as a means to address common concerns
- Issues of concern in the interface between religion and society, while it does not have a particular position on state – religion relationship

### **4. Objectives and Strategies**

To translate vision, mission, identity and principles into action, ECRL will pursue the following strategies in the period 2013 - 2018:

#### **4.1 Serve as a credible and legitimate European platform for interreligious dialogue, learning, co-operation and representation**

Members of ECRL will convene to discern the added value of inter-religious dialogue and co-operation - through annual meetings of the full council, with advisors and guests; addressing selected current

issues,

- through sharing insight and knowledge between respective faith traditions
- through consultations and conferences for a wider range of participants to address specific concerns
- through establishing multi-religious justification for joint action
- through statements, publications and other documents that are broadly disseminated and regarded as providing expert and representative multi-religious perspectives on key issues related to religion and society in Europe and beyond.
- through multireligious delegations

ECRL as a platform of representation will specifically engage with pan-European institutions, mainly European Union, Council of Europe and Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe with the following agendas:

- European Union : In the Lisbon Treaty (2009), § 17, the European Union commits itself to recognize the role of religions in Europe and to improve the dialogue with their institutions. ECRL is ready to contribute to this dialogue by conducting annual consultations on priority-issues in Brussels in close cooperation with relevant bodies of European Union
- Council of Europe : ECRL will continue participating in topical meetings, and offer suggestions for their agendas
- OSCE : Participate in events and processes related to freedom of religion and belief, eliminating hate crimes, and discrimination on religious and racial grounds. ECRL will explore with OSCE ways of developing operational partnerships in relevant country contexts.

ECRL intends, as a special task in the plan period to elaborate a *Report on Interreligious Co-operation in Europe* to be presented to European institutions and to a wider public by 2015.

## **4.2 Operate as an effective European agent of human dignity, peaceful coexistence and reconciliation**

Multi-religious dialogue and cooperation to

- build peace*
  - through working to prevent violent conflicts, engaging in conflict resolution, and acting to eliminate proliferation of weapons and promoting disarmament
- defend and promote human dignity, human rights and freedom of religion and belief through promoting*
  - legislation and practices, education and advocacy
  - appropriate roles of religion in the public sphere
  - protection of religious and belief minorities
- promote tolerance and unity in cultural diversity*
  - through religious teachings, confronting discrimination, building democratic cultures, and promoting equal legal and moral citizenship for all groups in society. ECRL will initially address these concerns through the “Living together” project<sup>1</sup>
- support the dignity and rights of women and children in Europe*
  - through examining critically practices of our own religious communities, and promoting human

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<sup>1</sup> «Living Together» is focusing on the increased pluralism through «newcomers» to Europe. Europe needs influx of people to maintain economic development and welfare. While the current level of “newcomers” is only 10%, four out of ten people expressed in an opinion poll that this number is already too high. Social conflicts can easily escalate with this gap between opinions and the political and economic realities. What can religious communities contribute in addressing some of these challenges, both within respective faith communities and through dialogue and cooperation across divides? Videos and discussion material will be developed and distributed, and religious groups will be encouraged to engage in local and national discussions and actions.

dignity, including fighting violence against women and children, and supporting legislation and practices that empower women. ECRL will mainly act through the Women of Faith Network “Restoring Dignity” program<sup>2</sup>.

e. *take action beyond the borders of Europe*

- when called upon, and in societies where ECRL can play a significant role in promoting multi-religious cooperation to build a culture of peace, secure religious freedom and promote tolerance with priority given to the sub-regions immediately neighboring Europe through accompaniment, delegations, exchange exposures and capacity building.

ECRL will continue its dialogue program with the MENA region and its readiness to accompany building and equipping national inter-religious councils – with emphasis on countries within OSCE. ECRL will further continue its engagements in East Timor and Sri Lanka in cooperation with Religions for Peace International.

f. *engage in global issues that deeply concern European religious communities*

- through taking advocacy actions in solidarity with marginalized communities in the Third World
- through continue campaigning against nuclear weapons, cluster munitions and for a global Arms Trade Treaty
- through promoting the implementation of the Universal Code on Holy Sites
- through increasing religious leaders’ commitment to fighting HIV&Aids

### **4.3 Help build, strengthen and equip national and regional multi-religious mechanisms**

a. *Build and develop inter-religious councils affiliated with RfP/ECRL*

- through clarifying their status and participation in ECRL in its constitution and bylaws
- through offering accompaniment and capacity building
- through mobilizing resources for seed funding their structures and activities
- through including them in consultations and initiatives that go beyond national borders. ECRL has the intention to convene representatives of national IRC councils for the Religious Leaders Summit on the occasion of the G8 meeting in Germany in 2015
- aiming at reaching 15 by 2018

b. *Support European Women of Faith Network and European Interfaith Youth Network*

- through mobilising resources for their structures and activities
- through the ECRL secretariat rendering administrative support as capacity allows and according to agreed-upon priorities.
- through including their representatives in ECRL consultations and delegations as deemed appropriate
- through considering operational agreements with EWFN and EIYN within areas of common concern and interest

### **4.4 Harmonize and strengthen the Religions for Peace network in Europe**

a. *Formalize relationship between national inter-religious councils and ECRL*

- through standardized tripartite affiliation agreements RfP International – national IRC – ECRL
- through establishing principles for linking ECRL members with their respective national RfP bodies.

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<sup>2</sup> «Restoring Dignity Campaign-End violence against Women and Girls” is an initiative that in Europe is spearheaded by EWFN. Different aspects of violence, including sexual violence, domestic violence and structural violence are being addressed. “Restoring Dignity” toolkit and exhibition have been developed and are being used as elements of the program.

- b. Harmonize the organizational relationships between different RfP bodies in Europe*  
- with emphasis on the relationship between ECRL and RfP-Europe.

## **5. Organizational location and profile for implementation**

ECRL members have primary responsibilities and identities related to their primary religious communities. It is an aim that all council members additionally identify themselves as ECRL/RfP actors/representatives as they operate in their own religious communities locally and Europe-wide, and in their local/national/European public exposure. This will considerably increase the position and visibility of ECRL.

ECRL has an organizational strength through its balance between representation and ability to act with credibility and sufficient expertise. This balance should be maintained through careful recruitment of members to the council.

ECRL is served by a Secretariat currently based in Oslo, Norway, led by a General Secretary. There are currently one full time and two part-time employees in the Secretariat. While the Secretariat primarily serves ECRL, support is rendered to other parts of Religions for Peace in Europe as far as capacity allows.

Staffing of ECRL secretariat should, as far as is feasible, reflect the geographical and religious diversity represented in the council.

Location of ECRL secretariat, including presence in key European cities (Brussels, Strasbourg, Vienna/Warsaw) should be clarified within the plan period. The link to European institutions should be strengthened in the coming years. The Council will review the location / presence of its secretariat in depth in 2016 in order to take a decision on this.

## **6. Budget**

Expected activities and achievements outlined in this plan are dependent on available resources. A combination of human resources, financial resources and in-kind contributions will shape the potentials and limitations. Time and other contributions by ECRL members are fundamental to the life and success of the council. Additional sources of financial and in-kind contributions will, however be crucial for bringing ECRL closer to its potential. Some activities in this plan are dependent on financial resources that need to be raised beyond the 2013 level of the budget.

ECRL has been substantially supported by Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs through their ODA framework. The Ministry has seen the great value of ECRL, not least in reflecting the important role it can play as a European instrument for promoting peace beyond its border. It is hoped that the Ministry will continue supporting the Council in the years to come.

The members of the ECRL and their constituencies have contributed substantially by hosting meetings and events, and by covering their own expenses during Council meetings. This contribution needs to be continued.

There is a need to diversify and expand funding partnerships in order to secure sustainability of the Council and enhance its ability to achieve its objectives. The following categories of funding partners will be systematically pursued:

- Governments, as far as their frameworks are satisfactorily aligned with ECRL vision and mission.
- European Union
- Foundations
- Private sponsors (business and individuals)

Ownership and sustainability will be substantially improved by financial contributions from council members. These contributions may be on two levels:

- annual membership contributions
- members' efforts to mobilize contributions from their respective institutions or other local donor partners beyond their membership contributions

## 7. Monitoring and Evaluation

This plan is guided by the ambition that by 2018 ECRL is:

- a. the most representative and credible multi-religious organisation in Europe
- b. the preferred interlocutor for political structures, i.e. European Union, Council of Europe and Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe on issues related to freedom of religion and belief, religion in the public sphere and inter-faith dialogue and cooperation for peace and reconciliation.
- c. regarded as the credible multi-religious partner by denominational umbrella organizations, i.e. CEC, CCEE/COMECE, relevant Muslim organisations, Hindu Forum of Europe, Conference of European Rabbis, and European Buddhist Union.
- d. a respected and relevant partner for civil society organisations and private sector
- e. owned and promoted by its members when they meet in ECRL contexts and in the daily work in their respective religious constituencies.

ECRL is involved in many process oriented activities that are hard to measure through quantitative means. Dialogue and common action are aims in their own right (main emphasis of the objective in section 4.1 above), while they at the same time are methods to build peace, promote human rights, religious freedom, tolerance and rights of women and children (main emphasis on objectives in section 4.2 above).

Long term effects in this field require work to be founded on solid knowledge and understanding. This is achieved through bringing in people with the necessary competency. The work also requires a constant monitoring of developments within the field of interreligious dialogue and conflict resolution in order to assess where Religions for Peace involvement can yield the highest dividend.

The planned “Report on Interreligious Co-operation in Europe” (section 4.1 above) can demonstrate what has been achieved in this field so far and by that contribute to the monitoring/evaluation process.

The Council intends to decide in 2016 how this work plan for the whole period 2013 – 2018 will be evaluated.