

## History of the Ecumenical Forum of Christian Women in Romania

Welcome to the celebration of the 25th Jubilee of the EFCW. The work of Ecumenism among women started 25 years ago in our country.

### 1. What is the Forum actually?

**The name** EFECW- with other words, Christian- stands for the community of those women who follow Christ; the word ecumenical means: collaboration or cooperation between different denominations. The foundation of the Forum must be Jesus Christ. Our relationship must be based on this foundation. (1 Cor.3,11)

2. Let's **see if there is a need at all for the common work of women?** What is the goal of the forum, what is the use of it among the other organisations of women?

I will talk about God's story, about what He did during the past 25 years through the Ecumenical Forum and through the World Day of Prayer.

### How did this service start in our country?

"You did not choose me, but I chose you." (Jn.15,16). Why did God choose exactly me for the service of starting the ecumenical work in our country? –I do not know, but I am convinced that He assigned me to this role. (God created us with a goal, he decided about our calling, and He makes us able to fulfil it.)

25 years ago, I did not know what the ecumenism really was, and I was not interested in building the Kingdom of God together with other denominations. God, on the other hand, did choose me for this work and He led me step by step. He made me experience **miracle after miracle**.

- In 1988 through a miracle my name ended up on the list of the women pastors of Hungary, and this is how the World Alliance of the Presbyterian Church invited me to America to attend a conference with 6,000 participants.

- It was a miracle that I got a passport without being an informer during the Communism.

- It was a miracle that I, with my airplane phobia got the courage to go all the way alone (humanly speaking) without one cent, with empty pockets to the West, to another continent.

- In New York, I had 30 minutes to change flight, but I did not find the gate of my next flight during this time. If I missed that plane, I would have been lost without any money, or a telephone number of the Conference, without food, being 1500 km away from the arrival point. God took care of me, He did not let the plane depart without me! The plane got a minor defect, and it had to be repaired, so during this time I also arrived at the gate.

- God prepared a wonderful experience for me through the ministry I was given. At this Conference, I saw a glimpse of Heaven: when we were singing together with 6,000 people of different skin colour, language, as we were praising God, I experienced an indescribable joy and love. Although I was

physically apart from those whom I loved, I did not feel lonely, because I experienced the ultimate joy of praising God, rejoicing in Him and hearing from Him along with the community of His people. Heaven must be a place of similar joy and love. I was overwhelmed with such love that I am truly feeling sorry for those who do not know this hug, who are not parts of the community of the Saints, who are only preoccupied with earthly things.

The miracles continued:

At this conference, my room-mate was Shirin Samuel from Pakistan, the general Secretary of the FLC, who not only encouraged me spiritually, and prayed for me, but two years later taught me how to write an application, and supported the ecumenical work that just started in our country. At this Conference, I got acquainted with Jean Mayland, who was the President of the European Forum at that time, and she invited me to the Conference in **York in 1990**. There were five of us from Romania (3 Orthodox and 2 Reformed). Here they asked me to be the Romanian Coordinator. This is how I became the National Coordinator of the European Forum in Romania, in other words, I could coordinate a non-existing organization.

I had no idea about what God's goal was, why He put me into this strange, new situation. How should I start to build an ecumenical network, when the denominational women gatherings did not even exist (they were not formed again after the Communism). I prayed a lot for wisdom, guidance and God counselled and led me further.

In **1991**, I invited the founder President of the EFECW, **Ruth Epting** from Switzerland, and one of the actual Presidents, the bask Maria Jose Arana from Spain, and we organized 1-1 day conferences in 5 big Cities (Cluj Napoca, Oradea, Targu Mures, Sibiu, Moldova- Agapia-Varatec), where our guests spoke about the importance of building the international ecumenical network and about the work of the EFECW. I asked the deans of the different denominations in written form to send representatives to this conference from the churches that belonged to their Diocese. This way I wanted to involve the 5 big cities and their surroundings to this interdenominational work. Many simply rejected the invitation, others sent participants. The big churches were full, apart from Moldova. I translated the Regulation of the European Forum to Hungarian, Romanian and I distributed it to the participants together with the registration form, and in 1 year 1300 women registered to the Forum.

In **1992**, at the meeting in Cluj Napoca, we **chose coordinators**, who agreed on engaging their cities, their dioceses into the ecumenical work. As we worked together, the interdenominational network got bigger and bigger and developed every year. We could only **register the forum officially** in **1998**, because we needed the approval of every denomination's bishop. We had to wait years until at least one Orthodox Bishop gave his blessing to this work. In **1999** the Southern branch office called "**Filiala Sud**" was registered in Bucharest.

## **Our Activity**

The committee program works on four areas:

- Theology and spirituality
- World Day of Prayer
- Education: medical ethic and environmental protection;
- Justice and peace

Between **1992-2016**, we organized **21 national conferences**, where various lecturers from abroad presented the work of the women's movements in various countries, so we could gather information and learn from their experience.

We have these yearly conferences in different towns so that we can involve new ones into the sphere of our activity.

In the first ten years, we had **coordinator meetings** once a year with the goal of providing the coordinators (organisers) of every county with reviews that they could work on during their fellowships.

The Forum finds **educational service** as an important part of its activity, to learn how to live the „love your neighbour as yourself commandment. We learn to love God together more as our differences, prejudices, or superiority or inferiority complex.

From **1995** we started organizing the **training courses in Cserefalva**. Between **1995- 2016** we had 60 courses with about 1035 participants.

Group leadership

Self-awareness

Healthcare

Strengthening faith/spiritually

Pastor`s wives training

Training for young women empowerment

The **self-awareness courses** helped us realize our values, helped us in starting our journey towards ourselves, others, God and the community. After finishing the 4 year-long courses in Cserefalva, 27 participants got a certificate as referents in Hungary from the Organisation of Adult Education for Christian Women.

The **group leadership courses** taught women how to organise and lead a group. The participants got several good ideas how to make their activities more varied, attractive and efficient.

The **spirituality courses** provided the participants with spiritual help material. We discussed various topics, Biblical texts which can be used by the participants at home.

The **bodily, and Spiritual Health course**, mainly dealt with the topic of “mens sana in corpore sano” and revealed to us ways of prevention for the four most frequent diseases of women.

In 2007, we began having the courses **for the Pastors' Wives**. Its goal was to support the pastors' wives in their multi-fold roles, in strengthening them in their calling. More than 150 pastors' wives participated on these occasions.

From 2008 we have been having **camps for young girls**. Its goal is to educate the youth in Christian spirit to teach them to accept one another and to build their personalities.

According to the feedback of the courses held in Cserefalva were very useful and blessed. Many got strengthened in their faith, received a new vision, reconciled within and outside their families, got healed and found friends and brothers.

These courses not only helped the education and training of women but they also helped to build up and **develop the ecumenical network**. Each group grows into a family, they keep in touch and experience that the problems arising from linguistic, denominational, professional and age differences can be overcome if we really wish to join forces.

The service of education is done by many organisations, and denominational women groups do a lot for the sake of serving life, but the unique fruit of the Forum is the miracle of seeing women living in different parts of the country, speaking different mother tongues, coming from different denominations, ages and educational background still learn together, laugh together, cry together and they receive an extraordinary power called: love. On the courses, we experienced that as long as the group asked for God's Spirit to strengthen them every day in prayer and also listened to the answer of God to their questions, there was a connection between the Everlasting and His children, there was understanding and love among them. As Jesus says: "As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abides in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me". John.15,4

**Other kind** of very important **projects** were done by the **Sudden Branch** of the Forum together with the Ecumenical Association of Churches in Romania – AIDROM.

#### Project: **Prevention on the Trafficking of Women in Romania**

The main objects of the program are:

- Empowering young women to take control of their lives
- Reintegrate victims of trafficking into society, through counselling and vocational training

#### Project: **Woman against violence**

The program' aims were helping different categories of people (children, young people, adults) to become aware of the violent behaviour and react against it. The program defines educational activities for different groups, from influential people (teachers, priests, mass media people) to young people.

#### Project: **Women' Working Conditions and Labour Rights** / implementing organisation EFRCW

The **Regional Forum Coordinators** worked also **in local groups**. There were groups of women that met monthly, or had quarterly meetings.

In many counties, the women come together every month, every time in different congregations. These meetings started with prayers, Bible studies. This was followed by various performances: educational performances, literary programs, travelling reports, songs, poems and all these enriched the occasions. Thus, sister fellowship was born inside and outside the regions.

An important task of the women's union is **social work**. Every union works conscientiously helping the one in need, but when the unions work together and serve common aims the help is more useful.

The activities proved efficiency in very different ways according to the circumstances:

Common offerings for the building of the church building, building parks for children, we supported women in need, cancer patients, people with diabetes, we helped alcoholics. We offered medical advice free, providing medication regardless of denominations;

Helping sick children, handicapped adults, orphanages and old people's homes;

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The Forum means not only **building the ecumenical network** within our country, but also **on international level**. We worked together with more European, Asian, American ecumenical organisation.

Just as: EFECW, WDP, FLC – Fellowship of the Least Coin –Asia; HEKS –Hilfswerk des Evangelischen Kirchen Schweiz; MEOT: Ecumenical Council of Churches in Hungary (Magyarországi Egyházak Ökumenikus Tanácsa) German World Day of Prayer; CEC- Switzerland; CPC - Christian Peace Conference –Prague; World Alliance of Reformed Churches Switzerland; Mother's union- UK, Catholic Women's League –Switzerland, Catholic and Lutheran women's group –Austria; etc.

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We were enriched in many ways through the **relationships with people from abroad**: as much spiritually as economically. Through sharing information, methods, experiences we learnt from each other. Via sharing our spiritual treasures, we encouraged, strengthened each other, learnt from one another. Finally, through these relationships we received **financial help** not only for the activities of the Forum and the WDP, but also in the creation of new organisations and foundations.

In 25 years, more than 150 girls / women took part in conferences abroad, as ambassadors of the Forum in 30 European, Asian, American, African and Australian countries. There are some people, through whom the network of our Forum, Prayer Day/Conference is developing even today. Others, with the help of the acquired information, trainings, relationships, are establishing new foundations; they are devoted in different areas but are also serving the benefit of people.

There are others, to whom it just gives the opportunity to take a nice trip abroad but they don't participate in our Forum activities. However, they also have gained something: let it be a new experience, relationship – it wasn't useless.

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Our common work's outstanding event is the **World Day of Prayer**. This, over 100-year-old movement connects the women of almost 200 countries through the channel of prayer. Its motto is the following: Informed prayer, prayerful action! The aim of the prayer movement is to provide a glimpse into the life

of women from all over the world, to learn about each other's joy, pain, to pray for each other and to express our sympathy through the act of love. Our country joined this movement **on ecumenical level** in **1992**. Between 1970-1992 only Lutheran women knew and had the Prayer Day. In 1990 at the York Forum Conference, I got acquainted with the coordinator of the European Prayer Day, who sent me the material for the Prayer Day in 1991, two weeks before the event; we translated it and we had the Prayer Day in the villages of Nyárárdmente. In 1992, we started to celebrate this day ecumenically and the Forum Coordinators and with the help of a dean 18 regions, 5 denominations joined to celebrate the Prayer Day with us. The number of the participants grew every year. In **1996**, we established the **Prayer Day committee** that has been working harmoniously for 14 years. In 2010 the WDP committee came to an end but its activity has continued to operate within the network of the Forum and more and more communities started to join the prayer movement. In the past few years, we have been receiving the Prayer Day books translated into Hungarian from the Hungarian Ecumenical Counsel which we are now passing on to 5 denominations' women fellowships and we are spreading them in 600 Reformed (Calvinist) congregations. We are organizing a national preparation day for the leaders of the local groups to make these events more colourful.

God has given us a lot of precious treasures through the common work: we were given the opportunity as God's people to learn more about each other. As we are entering a more intimate relationship with each other, more and more barriers are getting out of the way and the walls between us are constantly torn down. Through this we experience that people from different parts of the country are becoming our friends, colleagues, brothers and sisters in Christ. Together we can do more for the peace and harmony of the denominations, nations, and for those that need love, mercy and are hungry for peace and want to enhance the kingdom of God.

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I was faced with numerous **obstacles** throughout the 25 years in this ministry about which I could even write a full book. There are more people who do not believe in the unity of the denominations than those who do. However, unity is God's will. Jesus, in His High Priestly Prayer, is praying for the unity of believers: „**That they all may be one**; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.” (John 17:21) Does this only refer to the unity in our own congregation? Is Jesus teaching us that we shall love one another, help our own families and isolate ourselves from other people outside the congregation, not caring about them or paying any attention to them? Absolutely not, as Jesus came to this Earth to save it! He gave His life for the world, and He wants to do this ministry of saving lives until the end of times. In this idolatrous world however, the ministry of Christianity is authentic only then if we build the kingdom of God in love and in unity. How can the world believe in the love that we preach if us as Christians, the so called followers of Christ do not love each other? How can they take our words about forgiveness and peace seriously if we cannot forgive each other and are constantly bringing up the past, our offences, we emphasize the differences and if we are taking sides. How can the world give credit to our words, if we Christians won't behave as redeemed?

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**Is it possible** to fulfil God's will regarding the unity of Christianity, when there are so many different opinions, convictions that are dividing Christians? I believe and have experienced it several times that it is possible! God never asks us to do something that couldn't be done with His power.

**What does this unity mean for** which Jesus is praying? It is not the unity in belief system, conviction, organisation of churches or unity in liturgy as the person of Jesus, the gospel is so incredibly rich that it would be impossible to fully express, experience and grab it. But we can be one in the faith of the Father and the Son. We are the children of the same Father, we belong to the same fatherly home, our Redeemer and Saviour is the same. We are living in the same atmosphere: in the Father and in the Son. As a fish can only live in water, God's children can only truly live in Jesus. In other words: as the air is surrounding us but is in us at the same time (in our lungs) so do I live in Jesus and Jesus lives in me. Those who live in Jesus are being led by the Spirit. He overcomes the spirit of pride, conceit, isolation, distrust, fear in them and He works it out in us that we, as completely different brothers and sisters build the Kingdom of God together. As in an orchestra the many instruments sound differently but are still one, so can we be one – aside from our difference – to serve God's glory.

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In summary, the unity of the Christians is strongly on Jesus' heart. To enhance the Kingdom of God, we need to be real and Christlike. The unity is a matter of faith and the willingness to submit, therefore it works at some places, at other places it doesn't. We read in Mark 6:5 that: „And he could there do no mighty work, save that he laid his hands upon a few sick folks, and healed them.” Let us not forget, God is working in us according to the measure of faith in us. He didn't call us to be religiously gracious and to live locked in our small personal world waiting for what tomorrow brings, but to give our hands to others and with our personal value take part in every work and aspiration, that serves the Kingdom of God, the peace on this earth, the appreciation of each other, the brotherly love and that we live together more rightfully.

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Looking back, on the road we have taken so far, I praise the everlasting God, Who gave life to this movement even in our small country, I worship Him for those brothers and sisters whom He sent from the Christian network from all over the world to help and support us. I give glory to Him for our co-workers in our homeland with whom we were connected to deepen the love, the peace and the solidarity in this world. I am closing this speech with the words of Paul „Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.” (1Chor.15:58) Let His promise accompany us: „The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing.” (Zeph: 3,17)

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