Ruth Epting
Spirituality – Reconciliation – Hope for Life – Vision for the Future
Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women from 1982 to 2010

It is for me both a joy and an honour to describe the commitment of Ruth Epting to the Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women. From an early stage I was able to experience at first hand the work she did to set up the Ecumenical Forum, how she helped create ecumenical links and how she celebrated with us. I want to honour Ruth Epting's vision of a reconciled European neighbourhood, which strengthens peace, and her boundless desire to empower women and nurture their talents. She has become for many an ecumenist, a theologian, an advocate for peace and a pastor.

ENCOUNTERS WITH RUTH EPTING

Many people, including me, have been attracted, moved and captivated by Ruth Epting's vision of a reconciled co-operation in Europe.

1990 was the year of radical change in Europe: the 3rd General Assembly of the Forum took place in York, England. We had struggled to find the theme – "From Division to Vision". We tried to find a vision for the common European house. *"A house should be built in which equality and openness set the tone"* (from the Message of the 3rd General Assembly) Ahead of this General Assembly there were preparatory meetings. One of them was for young people who were going to help at the Assembly.
The then President of the Forum, Jean Mayland, had invited all of us who were already in York to her house. I can still see the scene very clearly: Ruth Epting sat in an armchair; around her were the young women, listening very intently as she talked about the beginnings of the Forum and her vision. She answered all their questions seriously, and a lively discussion ensued between the older and younger generations, between the different denominations and the most varied European regions.

The Forum enabled us to get to know the differences in Europe. We were familiar with the East-West conversation, but we needed some practice with the North-South conversation. The problem was not learning a language, but whether my words will be understood. The difficulties were not just in the language, but also in the thinking and understanding. Again and again there were misunderstandings. It was due to a misunderstanding, for example, at the 6th General Assembly, in El Escorial, Spain, that we came to a situation which threatened the network of the Forum. At the close of the Assembly the participants were invited to the ecumenical service of worship. Ruth Epting was one of the liturgists. We sat in a circle. Ruth went from one to another, anointed their hands and spoke words of healing and peace to them. Encouraged, we left that space, believing that the healing power of the anointing had led us on the path of reconciliation, and would continue to do so.
Another example:

At a meeting of National Co-ordinators in Porto, Portugal in 1999 I saw Ruth Epting walking along a corridor, shaking her head: she was probably asking herself, " How can we solve the conflict that has broken out?" She was responsible for the group which was preparing the closing worship. The group consisted of women from different denominations and different regions of Europe. A discussion about the creation of a 'proper' service seemed to be blocking all of them. The

participants debated deep into the night. Finally they succeeded in recalling their common basis of Biblical tradition, and were able to celebrate with all those present an ecumenical service which transcended boundaries.

SOLIDARITY EMPOWERS WOMEN TO FOUND A EUROPEAN NETWORK

Ruth Epting describes the beginnings in detail, in a pamphlet published by her in 1994: "A vision becomes reality – the Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women from its beginnings until 1990" A fascinating read, for the euphoria after the Second Vatican Council, 1964, had given way to sober reflection. But the friends who supported the ecumenical path of women knew that in encounters the debate can be carried forward, and that mutual respect can lead to ecumenical co-operation. In this way the vision was to become a reality.

The start of the Forum can be linked to the following dates:

In 1977 in Glion on Lake Geneva, at the invitation of the "Department for Women in Church and Society" of the WCC, there was a meeting of eighty people responsible for women's work. The participants wanted to discover what the particular concerns were of "half the world's population" i.e. women. During the conference it became clear to the Europeans that co-ordination, or even communication, among Christian women was lacking. In an "Open letter to European Christian women" they appealed for a joint attempt to be made to find a way of working together.

1978 Women's Consultation in Brussels. The Lutheran theologian from Vienna, Evi Krobath, who was present at this first European Women's Consultation, wrote. "70 women from 21 European countries had come. ……for many it was the first time that they had heard concepts like 'feminism' in conjunction with Christianity, and 'feminist theology'. Many things must have had an unsettling effect…….Subjects like peace and armaments, poverty, the environment, and specific questions for women, like violence against women….. all these characterised the conference even then. …….All were agreed, no matter how difficult the conference had been, that the thing had to carry on. So – the Forum of European Christian Women was born. Ruth Epting, a Reformed minister in Basel, was appointed as midwife. Labour pains went on unusually long – 4 years – but then the time came and in Gwatt, Switzerland, in March 1982 the inaugural meeting took place" (from the address at the first ecumenical women's meeting for Austria, 1992.

1982 Inaugural Meeting of the Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women in Gwatt, on Lake Thun, Switzerland.
Many roads led to the founding of the pan-European network of women from all Christian churches (Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant), for example the ecumenical spirit of optimism after the second Vatican Council, 1964; the peace-threatening arms build-up in Europe; and the emergence of feminist theology.

Madeleine Barot, from the French Reformed Church, who in the 60s had led the women's department of the WCC (World Council of Churches), the Spanish woman Pillar Bellosillo, long serving President of WUCWO (World Union of Catholic Women's Organisations), Inga Brita Castren from Finland and many others had paved the ecumenical way for women.

"*A Forum was to be founded in Europe, consisting of women with equal rights from all denominations and churches, who, on the basis of their common identity, were ready to commit themselves to stronger co-operation of women and men in the church and in society. But the full membership of Roman Catholic women was by no means a matter of course. The negotiations with WUCWO (World Union of Catholic Women's Organisations) were taken on by Jacqueline Stuyt. It is thanks to her initiative in going to the Vatican to secure the agreement of the CCEE (European Bishops' Conference) that full membership was achieved"* Marianne Maus, Germany)

CEC (Conference of European Churches) was also at first somewhat negative. But it happened that in a meeting of the full Assembly in Crete in 1979 there was a report on the intentions of women. Mutual representation was achieved, and Marjolaine Chevalier, France, was then nominated as delegate to the Forum.

The Ecumenical Forum: a Christian network of women, which spans Europe from North to South, from East to West.

The co-operation of women from all churches is unique in ecumenism. Every voice/vote of a church is to be equally valued. At elections a major effort is made to ensure that Europe is visible in all its variety. The constitution lays down that *"the General Assembly elects the members of the Co-ordinating Committee and the Co-presidents, taking into consideration the various regions, cultures, denominations and Christian traditions in Europe"*

An important decision was taken at the 1990 York General Assembly. The presidium shall consist of three Co-presidents, one from each of the three main denominational strands – Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox. The three Co-presidents work as equals.

Elisabeth Raiser writes about the General Assembly in York: *"The General Assembly in York has elected three Presidents. In doing this, we have decided on a leadership structure which is up till now unusual in churches. It is inspired by the idea of shared responsibility and power which has for years been the subject of lively discussion among women, and has also been tried out."*

Every four years there are elections for the Presidium and the Co-ordinating Committee. The National Co-ordinators meet every year to exchange information and experience, and to agree on projects. The personal encounters deepen the contact and make joint working easier. The

meeting in Versailles in September 2008 took as its theme "Women in dialogue in a multicultural and multifaith Europe".

The work of the Forum is funded by members' contributions, grants from churches and church-related bodies, foundations, the Ruth-Epting-Fund, the Jacqueline-Stuyt-Legacy, and from the circle of friends of the Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women

Working Method
From the beginning the Forum had created commissions:

Justice and Peace, with subjects such as overcoming violence, social security for women, winners and losers in the new Europe…. The impetus to attend the First European Ecumenical Assembly in Basle came from this group.

Ecology and Bioethics concerned itself, among other things, with the consequences of Chernobyl (a Garden of Hope was created in Minsk), varied assessments of genetic engineering, pollution of air and water. One outcome was the ecological summer school, which still takes place.

Theology and Spirituality above all prepared the theological and spiritual elements of the General Assembly, and worked on studies.
From 1990 to 1994 the Theology and Spirituality Commission set itself this priority. (?)
In April 1991 it held its first meeting at Dealu Monastery/Convent near Bucharest. The commission wanted to stimulate women to work together on an ecumenical basis. Also, the concerns of women in Southern and Eastern Europe should be at the centre of their work.
In 1994 the commission brought out a study paper on "Taboo: Blood". They chose the story of the woman with the issue of blood (Mark 5: 24-34) , and explained why: "Our work brought us together in the joy of this woman, whom Jesus had healed. But it also separated us. Some of us spoke of the 'uncleanness' of woman and the consequences that this had for her in certain churches: on the other hand our attention was drawn to the mistake of loading onto Judaism the whole weight of uncleanness, from which Jesus has freed us". In her contribution, Ruth Epting writes; *"If women today dare to speak about their own experiences of menstruation, having been brought up to be silent about sexuality, this is because they feel freed and restored as complete human beings, capable of playing their part in the full community of men and women which we seek"*

The Commissions lasted until 1998. After the General Assembly in Madrid they were discontinued, because there was a change of structures within the Forum. Project work was transferred to member countries, and themes were chosen within the regions.
In future, members of the Forum will have to make a greater effort in respect of matters of common concern, and not .lose sight of aim of working together. Otherwise the danger of a loss of solidarity looms. Working on a federal basis demands stronger communications.

WOMEN LIVE ECUMENISM

The desire for reconciliation and peace had led to this comprehensive European view. The Reformed pastor Ruth Epting got involved and made contacts.

The conversation with the Orthodox women
Her knowledge of international ecumenical theology inspired her to spend a couple of weeks in an Orthodox convent, to get to know the life of faith of the Orthodox sisters and to discern

it with the heart. For me she was one of the first to bring Orthodoxy close to us who came from the western churches. She helped us to broaden our ecumenical view.

In 1987 the Co-ordinating Committee was invited to Moscow and Minsk. It was my first journey with Ruth Epting, one of many journeys to Russia. In Minsk we visited the memorial of Chatyn, which commemorates the victims of Hitler's attack. We stood deeply moved in front of the memorial plaques. Ruth was silent, and it became clear to me why she did so much for reconciliation and peace across European borders.

Ruth Epting, who was respected, prepared the conference of all Christian women from the socialist countries of the Soviet Union, together with Nina Bobrova from Moscow. Nina had asked her;

"Ruth, you must help me to find a way for us women"

"The conference took place in April 1983, with Orthodox, Protestant and Catholic women. Thanks to this conference women were prepared for the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Vancouver, as well as for the construction of the Forum.

Over the years, ecumenical links with Russia became weaker. Ruth Epting used her personal contacts and travelled to Moscow and St Petersburg to strengthen the links again. In 2003 I accompanied her to the multicultural city of St Petersburg. Together with Marina Shishova from the Russian Orthodox Church and Tamara Tatsenko from the Lutheran Church an ecumenical women's conference was organised, which took place in September 2005 in St Petersburg. 30 women from Russia, Finland, Switzerland, Greece and Austria sat round the table together. All the major denominations were represented: Russian Orthodox, Finnish Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed.
They were intensive days: we discussed, reflected, listened to personal stories, and looked for common ground. The conference agreed a statement: *"We could listen and understand each other as Christian women on the background of different biblical texts and practical experiences in our congregations and countries. We hope to continue this kind of ecumenical learning and exchange on all fields. Our wish is that the official churches are aware of the contribution that women give to their life."*
St. Petersburg. 12. September 2005"

...and with the women from the South
At this point I want to thank the women who have drawn our attention to South-East Europe – and who have encouraged the Forum to run projects in their countries or invited us to their projects. The following subjects were important:
Romania and Moldova: trafficking in women
Greece: ecumenical learning – Orthodoxy
Italy: ecology
Portugal: multicultural co-existence
Spain: feminist theology
Bulgaria: project management.
One high point was the Women Festival of 2000 in Perea near Thessaloniki. Those who were there still dream about it.

Ask the women about ecumenism

That was the invitation during the 2nd European Ecumenical Assembly in Graz in 1997. Ask the women who overcome barriers, endure tensions, and believe in ecumenical co-operation. The Forum has been a European place of encounters all these years, and will continue to be.

INTRODUCING WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES

2nd General Assembly 1986, Järvenpaa, Finland

"Not a club, but a forum" was the opinion of the first President of the Forum, Nicole Fischer, of Geneva, Switzerland. In her report from the 2nd General Assembly, which took as its theme 'Sharing Life, Building Hope', she makes it quite clear that building the European ecumenical network will mean a lot of work. And she emphasizes above all that we cannot avoid the difficult questions. We have to take up the burden of history, commit ourselves to the renewal of faith from woman's perspective, and, as 'fellow workers with God' (1 Cor. 9), give new hope.
Nicole Fischer closes her report with the following words: *"There is no way we can demand recognition, if we do not work towards recognition for marginalised groups. We must beware of becoming a women's club which is self-absorbed, and spreads beautiful ideas. We demand the right to be represented at all levels in church and society, and we must bring to this demand our perspectives as women, our abilities as women, our feelings and hopes as women. And we will only succeed in this, if we are in the world. For we must emphasize that we are all God's children, who are made completely in his image, just like everyone else. Because God has promised it, we long to be fully human"*

One topic: '**for a life lived in peace and justice'**. Nina Bobrova from Moscow, Russian Orthodox, writes in her report:
"It really is not easy to build a bridge of love and friendship, especially when we realise the prejudices which belong with different political systems in our world. We have to learn together to speak the language of the heart, and to let peaceful co-existence on earth become

a constant concern in our lives. We can do it if we really want to. May God unite us in his love, and may we with one voice glorify God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 15:6)"

Another topic: **Women and work / Sharing – Utopian?** "We want to point out that the Bible contains more role-models for women than those of mother and housewife. The bringing up of children, parental responsibility, unpaid work – these are all services to society which can be done by women and men, and which should be rewarded by the appropriate social benefits. All work serves to support life. Therefore we support the transformation of the arms industry into peaceful industry. Churches and church-based women's groups should set an example and begin to experiment with new ways of working – job sharing, recognition of voluntary work."

4th General Assembly 1994: Budapest, Hungary.

On our ecumenical journeys we need spiritual support and mutual solidarity.

I'd like to say something about the preparation for the Budapest Assembly. We spent a long time looking for a theme for the General Assembly. We discussed the past, analysed the present and wondered about the future. Ruth Epting listened to us and reflected on our contributions. Then she got out her well-worn Bible, which accompanied her on all her European journeys, and looked for a text that fitted in with our conversations. That is how the theme for our 1994 General Assembly –"Be not afraid – remember the future" – came into being.
Europe was in a state of great change. For many the question was – what will happen next? The discussions and encounters helped us to name the problems and fears, and to believe that we would cope, as we had once overcome the divisions.

7th General Assembly 2006: Murten, Switzerland

The Message of the 7th General Assembly mentioned old demands and new challenges. The theme was "We are citizens of Europe: overcoming frontiers and respecting differences"

From the Message:

"As Christian women and citizens of Europe we are deeply concerned about the many ***exhausted, impoverished and endangered people*** *who land at the shores of Europe seeking a future. By doing this they often end up in conditions close to slavery. We recognise that women are particularly in danger and vulnerable in such situations.*

Europeans tend to forget that their ***values****, above all the very idea of human rights, were forged during long historic struggles to acknowledge diversity. There is no homogeneous European culture – in all countries of Europe the "we" has always been a conglomerate of diversity.*

We don't own Europe. As Christian women we confess that ***the earth belongs to God*** *and is only entrusted to us. Saying "we" leads us to saying "they" and thus to the exclusion of others who are also God's beloved creatures.*

Peace *is a long process of rebuilding relationships and creating just conditions for living together. Countless women are involved in it at many levels.*

We commend all ***initiatives of dialogue*** *between people of different faiths and of no faith, and encourage all experiments to enhance good neighbourly living. We affirm the rights and responsibilities of religious minorities, including the right to have their own buildings.*

As Christian women we deplore the fact that ***women and gender issues*** *are no longer given the priority that they had during the Ecumenical Decade "Churches in Solidarity with Women", and that progress that has already been achieved is being undermined. In many churches women's desks are disappearing.*

We demand that our churches live up to their commitment in the ***Charta Ecumenica,*** *'to strengthen the position and equal rights of women in all areas of life and to foster partnership in church and society between women and men' – not only in word but in deed."*

A GUIDE FOR THE FUTURE WORK OF THE FORUM

"Walking in the border zone – the way of reconciliation". A joint meeting of women from the Czech Republic, Bavaria and Austria I Budějovice/Budweis in 2003: '…and the dividing wall has been broken down' (Ephesians 2:11-14*). "Reconciliation is a process of healing old wounds, and healing processes need time. Maybe they will begin with the desire to get to know each other, to tell each other your own story, to understand and learn to respect each other. The work of reconciliation is hard work. Taking down the walls of old enmities – stone by stone – reminds of the hard work of Sisyphus. But I think that women have a particular talent for not giving up."* (Evi Krobath from Vienna)

In 2010 the Forum approaches its 8th General Assembly. It will be held in Loccum, near Hanover in Germany. Its theme will be "Participation and Responsibility: on the way of justice there is life" In the invitation we shall be reminded that we are not just to call for justice, but to get involved. We are going to have to ask ourselves if we are ready to work together, responsibly and loudly, to create a reconciled togetherness in our pluralist times.

In order to have a discussion, there must be three people.
To make a group, five or six have to come together.
We always need someone.

The song is heard in the sound of voices.
Joy is created when many are together.
Sharing is the symbol of community.
We always need someone.

God is with us.
God leads us together.
God unites us.
May God's love live in us.
May God's presence enlighten us.
May God's word strengthen us.

Liturgy from the celebration at the meeting of the
Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women
29.2.1992 in Versailles

Inge Schintlmeister
Co-President of EFECW 1998 – 2006
Vienna, 9th February 2010

Documents used:

Reports und Bulletins from 1986, 1988, 1990, 191 1992, 2006, published by the Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women

Booklet 1990 „Eine Vision wird Wirklichkeit“ (A vision becomes reality) ed. Ruth Epting

Study paper 1994 “Taboo: Blood“, published by the Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women

Paper by Evi Krobath for the 1st ecumenical meeting of Austrian women: Vienna, 1992

„efa“ Evangelische Frauenarbeit i.Ö. (Protestant Women’s Work in Austria) Nr.1/05 Evi Krobath, „Die Mauer, die dazwischen war, ist abgerissen;“ (and the dividing wall has been broken down); a Biblical reflection

Appendix

1. Names of some of the founding mothers:

A representative selection:
Rev Marianne Maus; Protestant, Germany;
Rev Inge Heiling from Schwerin;
Judith Pasztor; Reformed, Hungary;
Joyce Gray; Reformed, Scotland;
Fernanda Comba from the Waldensian Church, Italy;
Claire- Lise Ott; Reformed, France;
Aagot Bohn; Roman Catholic, Denmark;
Anezka Ebertová; Hussite, Prague;
Nina Bobrova; Russian-Orthodox, Moskow;
Martha Schädelin; Reformed, Berne;
Dora Wegmann; Reformed, Zürich;
Jacqueline Stuyt, Roman Catholic, London, represented the Roman Catholic denomination;
Marjolaine Chevallier, Strasbourg, represented the Conference of European Churches.

2. List of Presidents – Co-Presidents

1982-1986: Nicole Fischer; Reformed, Switzerland
Since 1986 Ruth Epting has been Honorary President of the Ecumenical Forum
1986-1990: Jean Mayland; Anglican, England
1990-1994: Marie-José Arana; Roman Catholic, Spain
Reeta Leskinen; Lutheran Finland
Elisabeth Raiser; Protestant, Germany
1994-1998: Ragni Lantz; Baptist, Sweden
Alexina Murphy; Roman Catholic, England
Piirko Siili; Orthodox, Finland
1998-2006: Catherine Gyarmathy; Roman Catholic, Schweiz
Katerina Karkala-Zorba; Orthodox, Greece
Inge Schintlmeister; Lutheran, Austria
2006-2010: Martina Heinrichs; Roman Catholic, Netherlands
Dorothy Knights; Anglican, England
Elena Timofticiuc; Orthodox, Romania

3. EFECW – General Assemblies

1982	**Peace and Justice: Christian Women's Commitment to Justice**	**Founding Assembly in Switzerland Gwatt, May 15 – 21**
1986	**Sharing Life, Building Hope**	**2nd General Assembly, Finland Jarvenpää, June 2 – 8**
1990	**From Divison to Vision**	**3rd General Assembly, England York, July, 14 - 20**
1994	**Be not afraid – remember the Future**	**4th General Assembly, Hungary Budapest, August 19 – 26**
1998	**Facing the New Millennium with Promise**	**5th General Assembly, Spain El Escorial, June 4 – 10**
2002	**Called to Compassion and Freedom Christian Women Shaping the Future**	**6th General Assembly, Czech Republic Celakovice, August 25 – September 1**
2006	**We are Citizens of Europe! Daring to overcome frontiers – Respecting Differences**	**7th General Assembly, Switzerland Murten, August 21- 27**
2010	**Participation and Responsibility – On the way of justice there is life**	**8th General Assembly, Germany Loccum, August 23-29**

4. National Coordinators' Meetings

1989	**Preparation for III.GA in York, England**	**Austria, Vienna**
1992	**Networking**	**Germany, Soest**
1995	**Europe: you can't kill the spirit**	**Romania, Ilieni/ Brasov**
1996	**Wenn der Stacheldraht rote Rosen trägt (When the barbed wire bears red roses)**	**Germany, Hirschluch / Berlin**
1997	**Preparation for V GA in Escorial, Spain**	**Finland, Turku**
1999	**Living in a multicultural society**	**Portugal, Porto**
2000	**Searching for the female soul of Europe Myth or Reality?**	**Greece, Thessaloniki /Perea**
2001	**Telling our stories – Tracing the Multicultural Diversity of Europe**	**England, Ushaw**
2003	**Towards a Just and Inclusive Europe**	**France, Strasbourg**
2004	**Christian Values for a Multicultural Europe: Women's Perspective**	**Germany, Loccum**
2005	**The Challenge of Democracy**	**Slovakia, Sväty Jur / Bratislava**

2007	**Mammon and Money, Finance Capacity Building**	**Netherlands, Huissen**
2008	**Women in Dialogue in a multicultural and multi-faith Europe**	**France, Versailles**
2009	**Women, Peace and Security – A Roadmap to UN Resolution 1325**	**Sweden, Sigtuna**

5. EFECW-Projects List

1984 Job situation for Women or the army of reservists for work
Netherlands, Driebergen
1988 Clowns of God Sweden, Sigtuna
1988 Nach Gerechtigkeit streben, Frieden machen, mitgeschöpflich leben
Germany-GDR, Berlin - Hirschluch
1989 Striving for Justice, Making Peace, Living Gently with Creation
Switzerland, Boldern bei Zurich

<u>European Ecumenical Assembly</u>
1989 1.EEA, Frauenboot (Women's Boat), Hearing Switzerland, Basel

1997 2.EEA , women's centre with hearings, workshops and coffee
Austria, Graz
2007 3.EEA, meeting point: Café Ruth, Coffee&Tea Romania, Sibiu

Trafficking

1999 Consultation together with CEC: Trafficking in Women in Europe Netherlands, Driebergen

from 2003 - Seminars on the subject of trafficking in women Romania

Management (after 1990)

Management training: Computer Project und English

Several Lydia /Adelheid Projects:	**Czech Rep. and United Kingdom**
Thekla-Project:	**Greece**
Project management:	**Romania, Bulgaria**

Reconciliation

Neighbouring East - West	**Poland, Romania, Germany (Berlin), Russia (Kaliningrad), Estonia**

Pilgrimage EGERIA from Spain to Jerusalem 2005 -2015

Ecology

1996	**Garden of Hope– 10 years after Chernobyl:**	**Minsk, Belarus**
2000	**Ecological Summer School**	**Sväty Jur, Slovakia**
2003	**Ecological Summer School**	**Sväty Jur, Sovakia**
2005	**Ecological Summer School**	**Feketic, Serbia**

Theology

2003	**Ecumenical Learning**	**Volos, Greece; Orthodox**
2004	**Ecumenical Learning**	**Madrid, Spain; RC**
2008	**Ecumenical Learning**	**Dunblane, Scotland; Protestant.**
2005	**Beyond Feminism?**	**St. Petersburg, Russia**

10. February 2010
Inge Schintlmeister

Translation into English by Jill King (Dec 2010)