



Final Report on “The Churches' Response of Welcome to the Migrant Other” (NF-CZ07-ICP-4-334-2016)

1 January 2016 – 30 September 2016

This report will first offer an overview of the work done during the course of the project, and then an evaluation of the project based on these outcomes and other relevant material.

Report on Activities

January

Most of this month was spent trying to sort out administrative questions with the Economic Department of the Protestant Faculty, in order to be able to sign the partnership agreement with the School of Mission and Theology (MHS) in Norway (since January 1st, this school is part of the VID Specialized University).

An initial conversation was held with Kari Storstein Haug, the lead person at MHS on our plans for the course. We sorted out her visit with at least one student for as much as possible of our conference in May, and spoke about how we would proceed.

From 17th-27th January I was in Amsterdam together with Ivana Noble, co-worker on the project on the Czech side, for an international doctoral seminar. Whilst there we were able to make a number of very useful contacts, and gather relevant and helpful material. We also used the opportunity to launch the programme. We met with Dr Rupen Das, Chair of the Migrant Crisis Working Group, Member of the Faculty of IBTSC Amsterdam and Consultant for Mission and Development, European Baptist Federation. He kindly passed on material he has gathered from around Europe and the Middle East (especially Lebanon, where he has worked with migrants in refugee camps). We discussed the need for theological reflection with him, and we have agreed to share materials and cooperate during the project (and after).

I also made renewed contact with Dr Darrell Jackson, author of a recent WCC publication on the Migrant Crisis in Europe, Darrell Jackson and Alessia Passarelli, *Mapping Migration, Mapping Churches' Responses in Europe: Belonging, Community and Integration: the Witness and Service of Churches in Europe* (Geneva: WCC, 2016), a copy of which we have also obtained. Whilst in Amsterdam I was able to speak to his wife, and discuss our project with her, and I hope to meet Dr Jackson, if he is in Europe during a forthcoming sabbatical.



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We also spoke about the project to participants in the seminar, some of whom are working with refugees in Lebanon, or coordinating projects in the USA, and in Canada. We also spoke to one student whose husband works for the Baptist Union of Norway on the theme.

Ivana Noble spoke to members of the student movement *Studentské hnutí za solidaritu* based in the Faculty of Arts of Charles University, though including students from other faculties and other young people, and agreed to serve as an external consultant and advisor to them in their work with migrants.

In February we continued to gather material and to work on various lectures that we had been asked to give and to plan the conference we had organised for May. It was becoming clear to us by this stage that the absence of refugees in the Czech Republic meant that the original aims of the project to look at how the church was involved in welcoming them in our setting would not make sense. Rather, through our discussions it became evident that we needed to focus on offering alternative visions to that sponsored by many of the politicians in the country that were resolutely anti-migrant.

In March we gave a joint lecture to the Christian Academy in Strážnice in Moravia, on the question of religious violence with particular reference to the migrant situation. Tim Noble was also working on preparing a lecture that he gave in Plzen in April as the main feature of a study day organised by the Central European Centre of Mission Studies, in which he spoke on mission as a duty of hospitality towards the other, particularly the other migrant. This allowed for an initial theological statement of the aims and theme of the project, and provoked good and full discussion, itself revealing of the different attitudes within the churches to the question. During March and April Ivana Noble was also involved in helping to plan for the conference in May, especially through initiating a series of contacts with representatives of different NGOs, aided greatly by the diligence of Dr Zdenko Širka.

The conference in May was held over three days and was jointly organised under the Protestant Theological Faculty of Charles University with the Anthropos Research Group based in the Faculty of Theology of KU Leuven, under the leadership of Prof. Yves De Maeseneer, and in conjunction with the Centre for Theology, Philosophy and Media Theory of the Catholic Theological Faculty of Charles University. The title of the conference was “Risks of Hospitality: Imagination and Reality”. There were thirty-six participants for all or most of the programme (the number was deliberately restricted to enable proper discussion and participation to occur), coming from fifteen different countries. This number included representatives of six NGOs working in different ways with migrants and refugees either in the country or outside, who spoke of the challenges they faced in the Czech Republic and what we as theologians could offer to them. Both Ivana Noble and Tim Noble gave major papers at the conference. Ivana Noble had the first lecture, setting the scene and presenting the problems and some ways forward, whilst Tim Noble spoke on the theme of hospitality in the works of two French Jewish philosophers, Vladimir Jankélévitch and Emmanuel Levinas.

It was very important for us that in the end four members of the Norwegian partner institution could come to the conference and actively participate in it, and then stay on for further discussions about future cooperation between our respective institutions that would enable the links fostered by the project. We were able to show them around – it was particularly fortunate that one of those who



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came was the Head Librarian and so we could introduce her to our librarian. It was also good to see what the Protestant Theological Faculty had to offer for students from Norway and how we could build on these links. This was facilitated also by a good meeting with the international department of the faculty.

During April and May we had also been in discussions with the Student Movement for Solidarity over the online encyclopaedia on migration that they were planning, and we were asked to help with the preparation of theological articles for this work. Ivana Noble wrote six articles and Tim Noble another four during May and June, as well as asking our doctoral students to help out. After further discussion over the aims and plans and needs for this project, it was finally decided that it would be a good way to publicise the aims of the grant project and to reach a wider audience, so part of the money from the project was used to support this project, both in terms of payment for articles and for technical work on the project to get it up and running. This will be one major lasting outcome of the project.

One of the most significant aspects of the project was our visit to our partner institution in Norway, the MHS, now part of the VID Specialized University, based in Stavanger. This took place in June over a period of four days. We were able to spend time with our Norwegian partners, and meet with the study group that is working on similar issues to those we were dealing with on the project. This was enlightening and beneficial for us and an excellent chance to present our work, and to get to know more about the School. A concrete outcome of this has been the preparation and signing of an Erasmus agreement between our two institutions.

In July and August we worked both on the encyclopaedia and on papers for a conference in Helsinki. This was the conference of the leading academic association of ecumenical theologians in Europe, Societas Oecumenica, where Tim Noble gave a paper on the centrality of welcoming the other, and how to respond to those who wish to reject and harm this other. Although Ivana Noble had already been invited to speak at the conference on a theme given her by the conference organisers, she also referred in her presentation to work on the grant.

Earlier in July and August Ivana had also written and recorded a series of ten short morning meditations broadcast on Czech Radio, and widely listened to. These were broadcast at the end of August and beginning of September, and were firmly based on themes linked to the grant project, and were a highly important and successful way of reaching a much wider audience.

Also in August and then into September we carried out work on the final major piece of work for the project, the production of a small brochure that will go out to the local churches in the country. A major part of this was written by Tim Noble. His contribution consisted in an introduction and a brief factual overview of the current migrant situation, along with remarks on religion and violence. It then gave a selection of quotations chosen from major church leaders and bodies (Pope Francis, the WCC and the Czech Bishops' Conference and Czech Council of Churches). Finally, it offered a biblical and theological reflection on the situation and some questions for further discussion / reflection. Alongside this, we also asked members of NGOs to write about their work, and the deans of the three theological faculties of Charles University to write introductions, and the dean of Jabok



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Specialist High School to write on the importance of and for pastoral work of engaging with the migrant other. Ivana Noble was responsible for the illustrations and did a lot of liaising with the graphic designer on the layout of the brochure. The brochure has been published and is now being delivered around churches and Christian groups in the Czech Republic. It has also proved of interest (along with an English translation of some of the texts) to people in other European countries and in the United States.

Evaluation

The project fulfilled its aims. The first of these was establishing closer links with our Norwegian partner institution, which we managed to do. One very concrete outcome was the signing of an Erasmus agreement between our faculties to allow exchanges to continue in an organised way.

The second and more substantive aim was addressing the question of how churches in the Czech Republic can respond to the situation with refugees and migrants in Europe. We have made several contributions in this field. We have reflected and presented lectures and papers on this from a more academic perspective, looking at ways of engaging with the other which recognise both the problems and dangers inherent in that engagement as well as the demands placed on us. We have also reflected on how to deal with those who wish to reject the migrant and refugee, and what the Christian response should be to such people. At a more popular level we have produced a small booklet that addresses some of these questions and seeks to give information about the current situation, some responses from church leaders and some biblical and theological material to allow for further reflection. In this way we hope to create an atmosphere in which the questions can be discussed. Finally through and as part of the project we have supported a project that is putting together an online encyclopaedia on migration. This will present information on different aspects of migration, including theological aspects, and will be accessible to people online, thus serving as a solid base for future debates on the issue of migration.