

Intercultural Pastoral Care of University Students in NEB

In the NEB province the pioneering and frontier missionary situation in Europe is seen as an opportunity and a challenge for religious missionary presence. Without neglecting the traditional parish work the new svd missionaries are given choice to engage in a mission where each one can use his God given talent to promote and witness the kingdom of God. While trying to give practical implementation to the prophetic dialogue, the NEB province has given priority to the migrant inter-cultural and inter-religious communities. In a rather different and unique way this is being done by Fr Avin Kunnekkadam through his ministry with the International Student Chaplaincy (ISC). This is one of the missionary outreach programmes on university campuses. In this report he exposes different aspects of the intercultural and interreligious mission on the university campus.

A home away from home

The international student chaplaincy is present in the following localities: the UNESCO –IHE institute for water Education, the Erasmus university Rotterdam, the Technical University Delft (TU Delft) and the International Institute of Social Studies Den Haag (ISS). Every Sunday international students belonging to more than 45 nationalities come together for the Eucharistic celebration. More than the building the ministry of the chaplains and the presence of the community spirit creates for the international students in Nederland a home away from home. These students belong to bachelor study programmes, master study programmes and PhD research projects along with a number of alumni students. The coffee/tea and chatting after the Eucharist is an important social event to establish and foster the intercultural community formation. The inter-culturality is nurtured by regular activities often combined with a meal to create a sense of belonging. There is the bi-weekly Bible study, the monthly Global Meeting Point, the Interfaith Sharing Group, the yoga and meditation group which attract a lot of international students.

Companionship on the road of life

Students call on the chaplains for personal counseling. Being away from home in an unfamiliar surrounding can raise questions of identity and feelings of insecurity. Academic pressure can bring stress. Separation from one's family can result in homesickness and loneliness and a sense of meaninglessness etc. In this situation the chaplain is seen as a companion to their life journey in the university campus. I gave a marriage preparation course for 23 students together with "Motiv", an organization for coaching and training, and a Dutch catholic church in Delft. In 2011 couples got married and children were born in our community. Some students fell sick. In July 2012 we had two adult baptisms, three first Holy communion and two confirmations of students. In all these moments we accompanied the students in their happy and challenging moments of life. As an SVD religious missionary I am happy to be at the service of the international students.

Inspiration for personal growth

Besides the Sunday worship, Bible Study and individual counseling is given top priority in the chaplaincy ministry. We organize retreats for students to reflect about deeper questions of life relating to faith and profession. In January 2011 we held a retreat in a youth centre in Delft with the theme "Developing mature leadership – inspiration from Dag Hammarskjöld" (former UN

secretary), and in May 2011 we went to the convent of the SSPS sisters in Maastricht for 3 days of retreat to reflect on the theme “How to become a faithful professional”.

Chances to cross borders of religion, culture and nationality

One can say that all the ISC activities are intercultural and often inter-religious in nature. In our church services we sing songs in many languages and read texts from different church traditions. The chaplaincy exposes the students to other ways of life, other ways of thinking, other ways of believing. In our monthly Global Meeting Point sessions at times we have some hot discussions about population growth/one child policy, marriage in the 21st century and female genital mutilation, Euthanasia, gay marriage and lesbianism etc. In the Interfaith Sharing Group we talk about Muslim-Christian relationship in Egypt, faith & science, religion & technological advancement and about living with/without religion. These were good exercises in listening to other experiences and opinions and in discovering what we have in common.

In February 2012 we held an interfaith training weekend together with Islam & Dialogue for students of different religions. We attended a prayer in a mosque and in a church, and visited a temple and practiced the ‘Socrates dialogue method, and shared about our personal faith.

In November 2011 ISC, together with Islam & Dialogue, organized a big national Interfaith Conference with the theme “From conflict to peace – movements for dialogue and reconciliation”. This conference at the ISS in The Hague had more than 113 participants from 11 different universities.

The most literal ‘crossing of borders’ was the study trip to India in 2010 with the theme “discover India”. 15 students from 11 nationalities participated in the programme to explore spirituality, culture and religions of India. We also organized an Israel/Palestine study trip from 26 April to 6 May 2012. 14 students from TU Delft, UNESCO-IHE, ISS and Hogeschool Leiden joined the study trip. We were able to meet local people of all sectors of the Israeli and Palestinian society. Through their personal stories we learned about the different religions in that part of the world, about the history of the country, about the ongoing conflict and about many hopeful initiatives for dialogue, trust building and justice. It was a deeply touching and unforgettable experience. The university administrative staff are very grateful for the support of the chaplains and their contribution to the international students. The NEB province and the Rotterdam diocese wholeheartedly support our intercultural mission of university campus ministry.

Den Haag, July 2012
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