



Report for Andante Study Days 2022

A Vulnerable World Calls for Creative Women

International Cultural Centre, Lizari, Latvia, 1st- 6th June 2022

Thirty seven participants from thirteen organisations representing eleven nationalities gathered in the beautiful Latvian countryside in a modern ecologically friendly, cultural centre which was beautifully decorated with many original artworks of the founder Antonio Meneghetti. His vision of creating a centre which drew on the partnership of people and nature created an inspiring venue for our topic.

Inara Uzolina, member of the CoCoA and her Latvian colleagues warmly greeted us on a cold and wet afternoon and Inara efficiently commissioned her fleet of Latvian drivers and borrowed minibuses to cope with all the problems of international travel, post Covid as delegates missed connections and were stranded in security queues. The Latvian women encouraged us to make candles and the nature walks in the rain were cancelled as everyone was just pleased to see old and make new friends after our two year Covid break.

During the evening session the two Co-Presidents, Vroni Peterhans-Suter and Sabine Slawik officially welcomed everyone as we said the Andante prayer together with two candles lit, one for Andante and one for World Peace. The seventeen sustainability goals from the UN were placed around the central tree of the glass pavilion we gathered in.

Inara Uzolina welcomed everyone again and spoke about the Saint Martin's House project, originally started by the Dominicans, which is a refuge for women and children in need. The charity Renovabis fund education, but as it is not state funded, money is always needed for health and training. We agreed we would focus our fund raising over the study days for St. Martin's House.

Delegates were then invited to introduce the organisation they represented and summarise their work for Creation, Sustainability and Peace.

Thursday 2nd June 2022

Trees Van Montfoort, The Netherlands: Biblical Perspective on Creation

The first keynote speaker was Trees Van Montfoort, who is a theologian and journalist from the Netherlands. Her recent book, “Green Theology” was awarded the best theological book of 2019 in the Netherlands.

Trees van Montfoort outlined how the worldview of modern people is one of the causes of our ecological problems. Pope Francis calls it ‘the dominant technocratic paradigm’. Christians too put men on a pedestal and made nature as nothing more than resources to be exploited.

In Trees’s view the Bible can function as a mirror for modern people by showing a different worldview: the role of human beings in relation to the Earth is, first of all, to be aware that one is a creature among other creatures. Texts about God creating often represent God with female characteristics, as Spirit or as giving birth or as Lady Wisdom. In the New Testament Jesus is even portrayed as the incarnation of Wisdom.

Trees found the Bible pictures God as very much cooperating with the earth, and as in Genesis made a plea for Sunday to be kept special as a need to project a connection with family and nature. Christ as the incarnation of Wisdom and Saviour of the word can function as a deconstruction of the hierarchical dualisms of God and the earth, spirit and matter, male and female in favour of the diversity of creation. Pope Francis calls for ecological repentance, which means not just doing some things in a slightly greener way, but treating our co-creatures as brothers and sisters in our common home.

Discussion groups followed for which Trees had prepared questions. “Do you agree that the ecological crisis is a spiritual crisis and that we have to change our ways of thinking and believing?” made everyone see how the ecological crisis could come out of the spiritual crisis and how we all need to change our ways of thinking.

Vroni Peterhans-Suter, Switzerland: Church and Creation

Vroni Peterhans-Suter, our Co-President, lives in Switzerland and is a farmer and catechist. Vroni is also President of the Ecumenical Association Churches for the Environment oeku.ch and of the World Day of Prayer Switzerland.

Using the organisation oeku.ch as an example, Vroni Peterhans-Suter showed us how the mandate from the Bible and the theology of creation can be put into practice. The embedding of Creation Time from 1 September to 4 October each year should be given a significant place in the church year. Corona virus particularly has shown us how our plans depend on the cycle of life and death which belongs to all created beings.

The Church is grounded in what happened at Pentecost when we received the Holy Spirit, and as a world church we can protect the world. We as Christians have a special mission to protect our creation, so as we love our neighbour, we must care for the earth as our common home. Vroni explained how a "green cock" in Germany and Switzerland is making church congregations wake up and take action. In this way, the church can show a different face and image to the outside world, which will become increasingly important in view of its potential loss of significance.

But we also want to learn from each other what is already being done on this topic in the parishes of the participants. This talk should encourage us all to take concrete steps at home. If everyone can inspire a few the effect grows like a ripple on water.

In the evening, we were presented the new candidates for the Co-Ordinating Committee of Andante, and elections will follow at the General Assembly on Saturday morning. The candidates were Sabine Slawik, Germany, Marleen Peters-Van der Heyden, the Netherlands, Sophie Rudge, England, Weronica Felcis, Latvia and Aferdita Gjoni, Albania.

A lively marketplace followed where delegates sold local products they had brought to raise money for St. Martin's House.

Friday 3rd June 2022

The morning prayer was led by Hiltrud Lennert and Irmtraud Widmayer from KDFB, Germany, by the pond, which looked most uninviting for wild swimming.

Mary McHugh, Great Britain: Medicine and Creation

Mary McHugh is a physician specialising in Renal Medicine at a hospital in the northeast of England, and also the Convenor of the Science, Health and Bioethics Committee of the National Board of Catholic Women of England and Wales (a consultative body to the Bishops' Conference).

Mary explained how there is a strong relationship between a healthy planet and healthy people, which particularly impacts on the most vulnerable in society, who are women and children. Changes in the environment are already impacting negatively on people's health, for example rising nighttime temperatures are increasing sleep loss by an average of 44 hours. Global warming is exposing more regions to mosquito borne diseases. Destruction of natural habitat and urbanisation is bringing people closer to animals.

Animals are used for hormones for example heparin and insulin. Chinese medicine uses thirty six species of animals, which risks endangering them, as every year 1000 species become extinct.

In 2021 the WHO published 500 actions to decrease environmental death, as a healthy environment would reduce deaths by 25%. Migration caused by drought and rising sea levels leads to inaccessibility of health care, and women and children suffer further from forced marriage and sexual violence.

Mary alerted us to how respect for creation should encourage us to think of our bodies, as rising levels of obesity are caused by unhealthy diets and lack of exercise. Palm oil production destroys rain forest and torches wildlife. Refined palm oil becomes a trans fat which is converted by the liver to be stored as fat, however it is used in cheaper foods such as cakes and biscuits.

Personally we can all educate our families, communities, parishes and governments about the benefits to the planet and ourselves of healthy eating and lifestyles, although sadly this is an option more available to the richer members of society. Mary also extolled the value of wild swimming, which boosts the immune system and later bravely demonstrated her conviction by swimming in the pond at Lizari!

Iluta Lāce, Latvia: Women's Rights and Violence against Women

Our final speaker was Iluta Lāce, who is the founder of MARTA Centre, and currently the Centre's director and board member. Iluta is a leading expert in Latvia in the field of gender equality, domestic violence and human trafficking, providing expertise on the local and global context on domestic violence, knowledge of theory on preventing and combatting domestic violence and human trafficking as well as strategies for raising awareness and service provision. She is actively engaged in advocacy for necessary changes in the Latvian legislation regarding women's rights and violence against women, especially sexual exploitation. Before zeroing in on the issues of women's rights she has worked with youth and homeless children as a social worker.

Iluta has been vice president of the European Women's Lobby. She facilitated the development of services, promotion of girls and women's rights in Central Asia, Turkey, Seychelles, Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, Belarus etc. On 3rd May 2022, Iluta Lāce received an award from the President of Latvia for twenty years of work in the field of gender equality and the defense of victims of violence.

Iluta's presentation showed MARTA Centre's achievements in preventing violence against women. It focussed on well functioning safety measures for victims of violence, achieved from a long process of advocacy in Latvia, and from changes in public awareness about violence against women. This was a result of intense campaigning but also the impact of the Covid 19 situation locally and worldwide, as well as MARTAs support programmes for women. In Latvia domestic abuse rose by 40% during the pandemic.

Iluta as founder of the Marta Centre 20 years ago was proud of their record as since 2000 they have supported 470 victims of violence and 24 victims of trafficking. Work with the police has led to greater numbers of temporary protection orders being issued, although the police receive 10,000 calls a year for domestic violence, 4,000 of which could be life threatening. She is currently working towards Latvia ratifying the Istanbul Convention, but reported in Latvia opposition is from the Catholic, Orthodox and Lutheran churches.

Workshops

For the afternoons of the Study Days we had three workshops, so delegates could choose a different one each day. Sadly Monika von Palubicki, who was due to lead a workshop, “Climate Protection is Everyone’s Business” was a victim of travel chaos at Hamburg airport. However our Co-President, **Sabine Slawik**, nobly agreed to substitute a workshop about the Supply Chain Act.

The EU Supply Chain Act

In 2011, 31 UN Guiding Principles were drawn up to establish human rights, environmental and social standards in economic and production processes. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or global goals complement these UN guidelines. They are a collection of seventeen interconnected global goals which are intended to serve as a “blueprint for a better and more sustainable future for all”. In 2015, the SDGs were adopted by the United Nations General Assembly and are to be achieved by 2030.

After the collapse of a textile factory in Bangladesh (April 2013), Germany began to consider how - initially on a voluntary basis - the protection and rights of textile workers worldwide can be strengthened and also protected. Unfortunately, despite stronger demands from civil society, the first implementation step of the German Supply Chain Act was only a first small step - however, thanks to the legal stipulation, it enables further progress.

In the meantime, on the recommendation of the European Parliament, an EU supply chain law with much stronger requirements has been submitted to the EU Commission for consultation.

We are all called upon to support this, should there be petitions in our respective countries. In the workshop, the participants from Albania clearly showed the benefits for their country and the workers in the textile and shoe factories there. Everyone recognised that a strong, united Europe is needed and that solidarity among each other is required.

Walking the Talk – Permaculture and ecological practices in the times of environmental breakdown

The second workshop was given by **Elgars Felcis**, who is a researcher and lecturer at the University of Latvia. He is an active environmental and climate activist and scientist. He is Chairman of Latvian Permaculture Association since 2016 and co-founder of eco-community farmstead Zadini in rural Latvia since 2018.

As a sustainability scientist and activist, as well as the chairman of the Latvian Permaculture Association, Elgars Felcis gave a very close-up look to many sustainability and ecological lifestyle activities/movements in Latvia. He focused on the permaculture ethics and framework and experiences of slowly developing his eco-community. Recently we are beginning to realise the planet's resources are not limitless, however a free market economy has the assumption it does not matter where products come from. However most environmental problems are systemic so require government level change, although one's personal integrity will govern our own personal choices.

Energy Transition starts at home. Sustainability – a core value of our Christian society ?

The third workshop was led by **Jan Peters** who studied physics and was a development pioneer during eight years in Rwanda, Africa. Back in the Netherlands he became expert in sustainable energy production. He participated strongly in the settlement of the first wind farms. His last creative contribution to sustainable production was the invention and start-up of the product "Groene Stroom" and the development of the Smart Grids, meeting the integration of a substantial amount of stochastic wind and sun power and the optimal use of the flexible battery charging process of electric cars. Jan is still involved in local community development and he is still offering knowledge and advice by his one-person consulting company Energy Transition Advice.

The workshop focused on the climate problem, the Paris Agreement and the European Green Deal, the Dutch climate plan and what people are doing in local municipalities and energy cooperations in the Netherlands. Jan then showed us the ten steps to make our own houses "energy neutral, which included insulation methods, heating methods and electric cars. We then were able to talk through particular challenges our own individual circumstances presented. Everyone went away determined to try and implement some changes.

7th General Assembly of Andante

The 7th General Assembly of Andante started on Friday evening. Gerhard Ermischer, President of the Conference of International Non-Governmental Organisations at the Council of Europe, conveyed his greetings via Zoom and Sybille Bader Biland, the representative of our INGO, gave her report.

Saturday 4th June 2022

Saturday morning started with a prayer led by Sophie Rudge, followed by the continuation of the General Assembly. The new CoCoA was elected and Sabine Slawik and Sophie Rudge agreed to be co-chairs. Marleen Peters-Van der Heyden agreed to take over as Treasurer. Other CoCoA members are Aferdita Gjoni and Weronica Felcis.

Statement and final discussion

The statement was presented, and with linguistic improvements, approved. This was followed by a round table discussion, moderated by Marleen Peters-Van der Heyden, with our speakers Trees van Montfoort, Mary Mc Hugh and Vroni Peterhans-Suter.

Trees opened the discussion saying what an inspiring exchange we had had and this wisdom and spirit is so important as we see the number of Christians diminishing and so much violence against women and creation. Mary found the study days energising, spiritual, theological and practical and gained much from listening to the experiences of others. Vroni was very happy to be present at a physical meeting and particularly enjoyed Trees advocating the seventh day as the pinnacle of creation. We are all part of this growing and fading as the creation process continues and this is part of our faith. A rich exchange followed and all agreed we must share our experience and the wisdom gained in our own countries.

Andante Liturgy

The afternoon was brought to an end with an inspiring liturgy, anticipating the feast of Pentecost, prepared by Vroni Peterhans-Suter, with many delegates participating.

Cultural Evening

Following dinner, CoCoA member Inara Uzolina had organised an amazing group of children from a local traditional Latvian dance school to perform for us and this was followed by a group of women who wonderfully entertained us with traditional Latvian folk songs accompanied with traditional instruments and who persuaded us to sing and dance with them.

This was followed, as on previous evenings, by drinks and wonderful exchanges between old and new friends which make our Andante study days so rich, rewarding and enjoyable.

Sunday 5th June 2022

Excursion

On a beautiful sunny day we first visited the Catholic community of **Brukna** which is a Catholic community founded by a Catholic priest, but which is now run independently of the Church. The old manor house has been renovated and a new Church in the Armenian style built completely by the work of the community, which is made up of people who come with problems, such as drug or alcohol dependency. The community has been there now for 20 years and there are no employees, but all live as a family. The only requirement is they keep to the set timetable of activities and meals.

The day starts at 6am followed by swimming in the pond, prayer, breakfast, work, lunch, work and dinner. People can come and go as they please and do not pay, but give their labour, as money is generated by the products they grow and by renting out parts of the estate for festivals. The community welcomed us generously with coffee and biscuits.

We then travelled to the Church of **Skaistkalne**, which is a place of pilgrimage, with a charismatic parish priest (who had started the project at Brukna) and who positively encourages families to come. Mass, as it was Pentecost, took 2 hours, but we were all fascinated by the liturgy and the freedom of children to roam around and sweep up the petals other children dropped on the congregation from the balcony, particularly during the joyous Gloria. There was no editing of the 33 verses of the psalm!

Lunch followed in a nearby restaurant and we completed our excursion with a visit to the beautiful palace of **Rundale** and its gardens of roses. Sadly, even Inara could not conjure the roses into bloom. We had learnt from our permaculture expert Elgars Felcis that Latvia had had a very cold Spring, so all the plants were behind normal for the season.

However this does give us all a reason to return to Latvia in the future.

The Study Days were a wonderful occasion and we were all indebted to Inara Uzolina for her planning and organisation which allowed us all to enjoy our time in Latvia so much, all our excellent speakers, our major sponsor Bonifatiuswerk and of course the CoCoA .

Sophie Rudge, Co-President of Andante

June 2022