

Third European Ecumenical Assembly, Sibiu, Roumania
Report by George Walsh

Here are the long promised (and long!) 'more details' of my time in Romania. It's now 2 weeks since I got back and I've spent a lot of that time reading speeches and reports from the Assembly, talking to fellow participants and generally thinking over everything that happened. As has already been mentioned, my time at the Assembly wasn't particularly easy. It was 10 days full of new experiences – some good, some bad, all incredibly valuable.

Before I left I was worried about the journey, meeting everyone and what to expect, but I needn't have been. It became clear very early on that God had it all under control. I had friends in Budapest, Medias and Sibiu to meet me from the train, offer me hospitality overnight and to see me safely onto the next leg of my travels. I had a fantastic travel companion from Budapest to Sibiu, a fellow steward, who made the journey much more enjoyable. When we arrived we found that a few others were already there. We spent the afternoon together, and it was nice to have a few familiar faces when we met the rest of the group that evening.

I was one of a group of 120 stewards from about 30 European countries. We were based at the Orthodox Theological Faculty (a building undergoing fairly major renovation) during the day and we stayed about ten minutes walk away in a student hostel. We had four days before the delegates arrived to get to know each other and to learn about the Assembly and our role as stewards. We also had the chance to discuss the Assembly themes and to learn about different cultures and traditions – especially about Romania and the Orthodox Church. We really treasured this chance to be together as a group, and in these early days many friendships formed that would blossom over the week to come.

The wide variety of denominational and cultural backgrounds in the stewards' group enriched the daily prayer meetings we had before the delegates arrived. These meetings were organised by a small team of stewards and I really enjoyed the power and diversity of the worship. Singing played a big role in my time at Sibiu. The stewards received Assembly song-books and these were put to good use in the first few days as impromptu sing-alongs would break out at every available opportunity. This music would continue to be a big encouragement and comfort to me during long, hard working days.

On registration day I worked in the CCEE office. It was exciting to be able to speak to so many of the delegates and rewarding to feel like we were the first to welcome them to the Assembly. There were problems with badges being in the wrong places, but the staff worked really hard to try and make sure that this didn't cause too much of a problem for the delegates, and the delegates were mostly patient and understanding. The only blot on an otherwise enjoyable day were the separate CEC and CCEE offices. One delegate described arriving at the faculty to register with a group of friends, all Roman Catholics, and the sadness she felt at having to split from them to register in a separate office. The symbolism of essentially forcing people to divide by denomination at an ecumenical conference saddened both of us. She was, however, encouraged to discover the corridor linking the two offices and described the corridor as representing the Assembly process.

Stewards had a wide variety of jobs at the Assembly, including work with the press, documentation, language services and IT offices, staffing information desks and floor management. My task was as one of the head floor management stewards in the tent that served as the main venue. Working at the tent gave a sense of being right at the heart of what was happening. I may not have had time to listen to the main speeches but I had an insight into the backstage workings of the Assembly that I will never forget.

Something I found very hard to handle was the way that a lot of the stewards were treated by delegates. We were the public face of a long administrative chain and so often bore the brunt of the frustration people were feeling. However, this offers little or no excuse for some of our experiences. I was insulted, dismissed and even sworn at – mostly, but not exclusively, by clergy, some very senior. Maybe the fact that I didn't find this entirely surprising upset me more than the behaviour itself. I understand that clergy are human and so not perfect, but in my opinion it shouldn't be naïve to expect some degree of leadership by example in an area as simple as politeness.

That being said, the majority of the delegates were perfectly civil to the stewards, and many went out of their way to express their gratitude for the job we were doing. Those who accepted with patience and good humour the slightly chaotic environment were a blessing to us all and an example to their colleagues. It was fantastic to have a few familiar AIF/IFIN faces dotted around the tent to cheer me up!

I also had the chance to be part of a team of three who drafted the stewards' final reflection (which will hopefully be available online soon). We stole 'writing minutes' wherever we could find them – during breaks, meal times and, once the Assembly started, during precious sleeping hours. However, I appreciated the trust that the group placed in us - it was an enormous privilege to talk to our fellow stewards about their experiences, and to try and write something that represented us all.

During a debrief session one day, we were asked the question: 'Where did I meet God today?' I met God in the wonderful group of stewards around me who worked hard even when they were cold and hungry and tired, who kept me going with hugs and smiles and prayer. We lived together, ate together and worshipped together, we lived ecumenism for ten days. I met God in the perpetual calmness and cheerfulness of our supervisors and facilitators, in their advice, encouragement and gentle criticism, in their laughter and their tears. I met God in the strength to get up three hours after I'd gone to bed, in the ability to turn the other cheek, in the phrases of French and German which appeared from nowhere when I really needed them. I met God in the stillness of the quiet of late night walks back to the hostel, in the bustle of the pottery market in Piata Mare, in the good mornings, bonjours, guten morgens and buna dimineatas of the delegates each morning.

The night before we left Sibiu our prayer was one of the most profound and emotional that I have ever experienced. We spent over an hour together in the beautiful chapel in the Faculty singing Taizé chants and more traditional hymns in a variety of languages. We heard sung extracts from the Romanian Orthodox liturgy and the Roman Catholic liturgy of the hours. It was the most appropriate farewell to this group that I could ever have imagined. It was a bittersweet evening for all of us – a joyful celebration of our time together, but looking ahead to the next day when this group that had become family would have to part.

It is hard to tell the effect the Assembly has had. Lots of things were said and these need to be processed. It will always be hard to gauge the exact impact – the effect of face-to-face conversations and forging friendships, the effect on grassroots ecumenism when enthused participants return home, the effect of the Assembly on future Church leaders. My prayer is that, in these areas, the Assembly will continue to bear fruits for years to come.

Stewarding was a life-changing experience for me. I learnt an enormous amount about the Orthodox and Greek Catholic churches and I look forward to exploring them further. I left Sibiu feeling even more passionate about ecumenism, and my understanding of the ecumenical movement is much deeper. Through the Assembly I have found a lot of ways in which to continue my involvement in ecumenism at a European level and I hope to be able to pursue some of them.

Thank you all for your prayers and for the supportive emails I received along the way. I leave you with the closing statement of the stewards' presentation to the Assembly:

The light of Christ shines upon all - Are we willing to share it with each other?

George Walsh

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