**Successful launch of the Vaud Christian Forum**

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**By Martin Hoegger.**

On the first day of July, over 60 people gathered in Saint Légier, on the premises of the Haute École de théologie (HET-PRO) overlooking the Lake Geneva Riviera, for the first Vaud Christian Forum. A successful launch in a spirit of joyful fraternity and smiling benevolence!

Robin Reeve (Fédération évangélique vaudoise) welcomed the assembly to the Haute École where he teaches. Former president of the Communauté des Églises dans le Canton de Vaud, sees in this Forum "a new path that responds to a need to renew ecumenism". This initiative allows participants to discover what unites them and how they can act together as witnesses to Jesus Christ.

Frédéric Keller, head of ecumenism at the Evangelical Reformed Church of the Canton of Vaud (EERV), recalled the first meeting of the French-speaking Christian Forum in 2021. "Something powerful was experienced in Leysin: we recognized each other as brothers and sisters in Christ: that's the foundation," he said. He learned to ask these questions: who's missing at the table, who hasn't been invited or who's been excluded?

For Philippe Becquart, assistant to the bishop's representative in the canton, it's an immense joy to know that the Lord is bringing us together and that he will guide us. For him, the key word is "discernment". "We have planned not to anticipate too much, and invite the Spirit, who will enable us to discern how to move forward". He also thanked the church authorities who fully support this initiative and are present.

To kick off the meeting, Roula Lopez, an adult educator in the Catholic Church, distributed balloons to be inflated, on which everyone was invited to write a word that signifies ecumenical action. The balloons were then thrown on the ground. In small groups, people were then invited to say how they understand the word written on the balloon they picked up. And the room turned into a buzzing beehive!

**Who's missing at the table?**

Mennonite pastor Anne Cathy Graber spoke to us via the Internet from Paris, where she teaches ecumenism (Centre Sèvres). As a member of the Global Christian Forum Committee, she is undoubtedly the best qualified to explain its history and aims in the French-speaking world.

The Global Christian Forum was set up in 1998 following a drive by the World Council of Churches to involve "emerging churches", mainly evangelicals and Pentecostals, more closely in the ecumenical movement.

The founders saw the urgent need to open the dialogue table to other partners. The question is simple: who is missing at the table of this meeting? The image of the table suggests the notion of hospitality.

The pastor made it clear that the Forum is not intended to replace any other forum, but to encourage encounters through listening and prayer, which in turn energize dialogue.

Half the participants came from the "historic" churches, the other half from the younger ones. The Forum aimed to create an open space "to confess the Triune God and Christ as perfect man and perfect God, and to address together the challenges of today's world", as its spiritual basis affirms.

**Sharing your faith journey: the heart of a Forum meeting.**

Telling your faith story, or your encounter and journey with Jesus Christ, in a safe and secure setting...in seven minutes, that's the heart of a Christian Forum meeting," explains A.C. Graber.

This sharing of the stages in our lives when we have experienced Christ's presence and our response to it is decisive. This methodology has proved its worth in a number of contexts. It all starts with listening to others. Discovering the other's pilgrimage of faith fosters trust and spiritual friendship. "The consequence is interpersonal recognition, in both senses of the word: thanksgiving and discovering in the other a true disciple of Christ".

After this talk, the assembly divided into ten groups of six to experience these "faith itineraries", most of the groups went out into the magnificent natural surroundings of the "Emmaus Forum". Upon returning to the hall, the smiling faces testified without many words that transforming insight had occurred!

**Desire for a new stage**

After lunch, participants engaged in a three-stage discernment exercise. First, they listened to the Word of God through a "lectio divina".

It all starts with listening to the Word of God," emphasizes Robin Reeve, quoting Psalm 143, a "psalm of desire". It is the Word of God that enables us to discern the path to follow: "Make known to me the way I should go! Let me hear your goodness in the morning".

He invited us to read the story of Jacob's dream from the Book of Genesis several times in succession. After a moment of silence, each person could say what struck them about this great text, which speaks of a new beginning in the life of the patriarch. This was followed by a moment of free prayer, in which many voices expressed both gratitude for the road travelled and the desire to move on to a new stage.

**Dreams**

The day concluded with group work to dream up ecumenical projects for the canton of Vaud, followed by an exchange in confessional groups.

One observation: there are many things that are already being done... but which are little known or which need to be revitalized, such as the "Night of the open Churches".

Dreams are also shared, such as the need for community renewal through sharing groups, particularly in the Reformed and Catholic churches, whose congregations are shrinking.

How can churches also work together for greater sharing, social justice and ecology? "The comfort of our small parishes must not be stronger than the call of the Gospel," said one participant.

We also have important milestones ahead of us: 2025, the common date of Easter with the Orthodox Churches, and the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. A reflection on the foundations of our faith could take place on this occasion. 2027 with the anniversary of the first ecumenical conference in Lausanne...and 2033, the Jubilee of the 2000th anniversary of Christ's resurrection. How can we prepare ourselves to give witness together to the Risen Christ who has united us today and who will lead us in the future?

**What about young people?**

"There are a lot of gray hairs among us," remarked Nicodème Roulet, a student at HET-PRO. Where are the young people? Without them, ecumenism in the canton has no future! How can we reach them when the ecumenical question is posed differently for them: they mostly gather around projects. On the other hand, there were no members of immigrant churches participating. "We can't start projects without these two categories. Not forgetting the marginalized, the handicapped, the persecuted Church and communion with the Jewish people.

**"Give us friends!"**

It all starts with friendship: "Lord, give us friends"! Such was the prayer of one person in a small group. The Forum's approach fosters this spiritual friendship. We experienced it for ourselves today! We also felt that there was a great quality of relationship between the leaders of this day. Prayer, listening and mutual encouragement are essential.

At the end of the meeting, it was gratifying that six people agreed to form a working group to discern the way forward for the Christian Forum in Vaud.

Frédéric Keller concluded: "Something happened today: the joy of encounter and communion. We feel authorized to think about how to take the next step. And Philippe Becquart summarized: "We experienced a heart-warming fraternity and much good will. That there were so many of us present is a sign of the importance of ecumenism.

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