

The old world no longer exists.

In order of what is closest to our hearts and our objectives, as highlighted at the NGO conference held from 14 to 17 April in Strasbourg. Our network, the European Network Church on the Move, has participatory status there. That is to say, official status. Your representative (the undersigned) therefore has a permanent badge, allowing him access to the Council of Europe buildings at all times. First, however, he must pass through security, which always produces unexpected beeps. Our network brought along a blind participant, Ricardo, a Spaniard whom I was able to assist to some extent, but three volunteers had also been found in Strasbourg to guide him past all the tricky bumps and potholes on the street. Fortunately, we were both staying very close by at Saint Thomas, run by nuns.

The inter-religious/inter-philosophical committee, of which we are members, has made some progress in the long-running political process. We would like to see a committee with the same name established within the Council of Europe. But one that is much broader than just the Abrahamic faiths. Buddhists, for example, are not currently involved. This is, of course, a sensitive issue, as so far only men in long robes have been active in a sort of committee that does very little. This means first drafting texts that lend it credibility. But we have now really got a foot in the door at the Council. That has taken us another two years. European and religious wheels turn slowly. The work to tackle hate speech in Europe is impressive. Social media, for example, is full of it. This has resulted in many different NGOs stepping forward to monitor incidents. This concerns anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim statements. Hate speech against Christians is not yet being monitored. That, too, is an emerging phenomenon. Are schools still safe places for children and adolescents? Of course, the role of the State of Israel is a subject of much debate, as is the role of the Iranian state when it comes to Muslims, but every effort must be made not to politicise the issue. Incidents on all fronts must stop, as they only cause further divisions. It is not easy to remain neutral in this regard. Yet that is the task of the Council of Europe. Research shows that transgender people suffer the most from discrimination and hate speech. The bubble we generally live in doesn't notice it much, yet young people in particular are severely affected by it. At a local level, particularly in the educational sphere, people are working hard to combat it, but I did remark in the public debate whether we are not losing the 'war'. The new holistic, sustainable and inclusive world is not yet here. After all, everything is interconnected. That is the new reality. Finally, Ricardo remarked on why the documents are not actually accessible to a blind participant. Why not in Braille? A very valid point, but the answer remains up in the air. Of course, much more was discussed, but that's what the website is for. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/ingo/april-2026> Be sure to take a look at the work for the Migrants Committee. We're working flat out on this.

Henk Baars