

Experiences at the ICCJ and YLC conferences in Philadelphia 2016

Report by Tamara Ihle

A very personal journey

I have no theological studies. I have little institutional experience regarding religions. I don't have any credentials of my own in Jewish Christian Dialogue.

My participation has always been accompanying my father, Pastor Armin Ihle. Human rights in general and the importance of dialogue in particular have always been a main theme in our home. The conversations with my father were very intense, loud, reflective, fun and most of the times ended with a glass of wine and a "Lejaim". He taught me about theology, history, culture and what is right. I kept him open minded, modern and curious. So, although I have been a member of the Confraternidad Judeo-Cristiana del Uruguay for almost 20 years now, my journey is very personal. There is no CV, only personal histories.

Chapter 1 / The invitation

I was very surprised when I was asked to participate in the ICCJ conference in Philadelphia. I was (and still am) sure there are more prepared people than me. I assumed it was a more symbolic than deserved invitation in honor of my father, and considered it an invitation to work more closely in the future.

Although I love to travel the main reason I accepted the invitation was curiosity. My father always came back so happy and full of new ideas from the past ICCJ conferences, I never quite understood what was so fascinating. Now I was given the chance to experience it myself.

Chapter 2 / The city of brotherly love

My Philadelphia experience started one day before the conference. Soon after arriving at campus I left my bag in the room and took a bus to the city. I had to run up and down the Rocky Steps, a childhood dream come true! One of the adventures of traveling alone is embracing the opportunity of surprise. And surprised I was. I found a lot of interesting conversations during my walk, met people who migrated, people who told me stories of other times, people who had experienced a different World, a different USA, a different Philadelphia. Each story they shared was a gift, and every idea that was discussed is still evolving through new conversations with other strangers and friends.

Chapter 3 / A Jew, a Christian and a Muslim enter into a room...

That introduction is the promise of a great story.

A story that is not new, and is still being written.

A Muslim woman teaching about the Shoá, young students debating about the impact of religion in their lives and refusing to stay invisible, the thorough studies of a Lutheran Pastor about Luther and his relationship with Judaism... I was deeply impressed by the high academic level of the discussions and

panels at the ICCJ conference. I definitely took new ideas and concepts home, which are still sinking in and changing as they settle down in my brain.

The YLC conference was very interesting for other reasons. In a world where young people are so used to write anonymous comments on other people's walls I find it very brave being willing to have face to face conversations, knowing they can get very personal. One of the best practices was the setting of ground rules, words that were encouraged and words that should not be used in certain context. The idea that we come from a religious context, but that we do not represent all of it. I think that allowed everybody to discuss issues freely. We celebrated our diversity and at the same time we seemed oddly familiar. As if the direction we are seeking has a stronger influence than the different places we come from. And even though our heritage defines us it does not stop us from creating new experiences that someday will be part of someone else's heritage. Once we leave our fears behind we are free to dialogue.

Chapter 4 / ICCJ & YLC, is the age difference really that important?

These conferences make a big difference. Both of them.

But there is an entire generation whose voice has not been heard. "Young people" are not the future, they are the present. The same way "old people", "not so old" and "not so young" people are. I find it funny that we seek dialogue between religions but don't seem to be able to have conversations between generations. We need "old people" on the panels, even if they can get a little bit too academic, and we need "young people" even if their ideas are not that polished.

Real life is all about having difficult conversations. If we are only able to surround ourselves with people we agree with, we are being dangerously narrow-minded.

Chapter 5 / Back to the beginning

As I shared with you at the beginning, I was very curious what my father always found so appealing about these conferences and I definitely found the answer. Meeting people completely different from ourselves, having conversations about issues that do not directly affect one's daily life but mind, challenging our own comfort zone and beliefs, being able to change our mind... All of that explains why the interreligious dialogue and the people willing to have this dialogue were so important to him and now are to me.