

## **The History and Work of SYNDESMOS 1943 - 1996**

Slovakia (1995)

Esther Hookway

SYNDESMOS is an international federation of 118 Orthodox youth movements and theological schools from over 41 different countries. SYNDESMOS began as a forum for discussion and exchange. It offered a possibility of encounter and sharing among young people either studying theology or deeply committed to the Church and Her renewal.

SYNDESMOS (meaning "Bond of Unity" in Greek). Its main objectives are the following:

- Acting as a bond of unity among Orthodox youth and of strengthening within them a deeper understanding and vision of their faith, and of fostering relations between them.
- Assisting and promoting Orthodox efforts for visible Christian unity and for positive relations with people of other faiths and to be an instrument for furthering cooperation and deeper communion between the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Churches.

To meet these objectives SYNDESMOS can do the following:

- Organise meetings, camps, festivals and exchanges of Orthodox youth.
- Organise training and educational programmes for Orthodox youth.
- Publish educational and theological periodicals and other materials relevant to the objectives of SYNDESMOS.

### **SYNDESMOS Membership.**

To become a member of SYNDESMOS the applying youth group must fulfil the following criteria;

It must be Orthodox, with the blessing of their local bishop, who in turn must be recognised by one of the Heads of Churches. They must be able to prove that their principle aim is to serve the Orthodox Church by the promotion of Orthodox Church life and Christian witness among its members and in accordance with the aims and objectives of SYNDESMOS.

SYNDESMOS is made up of an Executive Committee. This consists of a President and 3 vice Presidents and the Board of Administration whose members represent the different regions of the world where SYNDESMOS has member movements. These people are elected to their positions by the voting delegates of SYNDESMOS member representatives during the SYNDESMOS General Assembly, the latter being the authoritative organ of the federation. And they are responsible for nominating a Secretary-General. Members of the Board should be kept in regular contact with the General Secretariat, attend the Board meetings which should be at about six month intervals, be willing to support and advise the Secretary-General and take part in the decision making processes. The regional SYNDESMOS representative should participate in regional activities, promote the work and aims of

the fellowship, encourage the young people to apply to take part in SYNDESMOS events, facilitate communication between the member movements and schools in the region and the General Secretariat

One of the odd features about the functioning of SYNDESMOS is the way in which the General Secretariat literally moves house every time a new General Secretary is elected. In the past this was a fairly small affair since it only constituted one or two boxes. This arrangement has meant that many countries have been able to profit from the presence of SYNDESMOS as in general there would always have been at least one youth gathering in that country during the time SYNDESMOS was based there. However over the past 5 years things have changed radically. The last move in December 1995, took 4 to 5 people 4 days to dismantle the office and pack it into the back of a van destined for Bialystok, Poland.

### **How SYNDESMOS has functioned on a day to day basis for the past 5 years.**

Until 1993 SYNDESMOS was coordinated from the home of the General Secretary and was not a full time employment. The number of projects, and events organised each year totalled two or three. The tremendous change came when Alexander Belopopsky took charge of the running of SYNDESMOS as Assistant Secretary-General in 1990 from the standing Secretary-General Anu Talvariou who was unable to continue her work with SYNDESMOS because of another job. The files which constituted the SYNDESMOS General Secretariat were moved to Alex's flat in Paris and from there he started the immense task of tapping into SYNDESMOS' potential of becoming the largest international Orthodox youth organisation of its kind. It must have been a daunting beginning having the responsibilities as a husband and father, to have to create a salary out of a structure, which up until that time had not succeeded in being cost effective.

Alexander concentrated on developing contacts, fundraising, and investing in a basic infrastructure, which radically improved the capacity of SYNDESMOS. Computers, printers, a photocopy machine were purchased. This contributed to the productivity, the quality and the visibility of SYNDESMOS. In 1993 the General Secretariat moved to an office in Paris, in the premises of ACER, SYNDESMOS member movement, and this reflected the growing administrative, fundraising and communication workload of SYNDESMOS. The employment of an assistant Secretary-General was also a reflection of this. With the growing number of projects it was no longer possible to leave the office totally unmanned for any great length of time, and the work load to catch up on the correspondence and general administration was too great for one person. The new office and the increase in SYNDESMOS staff strengthened the administrative base in an unprecedented way.

Since 1992 SYNDESMOS has been able to sustain a greater level of growth and development than ever before in its history. Over 40 projects have been implemented in the past 4 years and funding has been located to maintain and develop general operations. Greatly improved relationships with our Orthodox Patriarchates and close involvement of several leading hierarchs, is recognition of a new credibility. SYNDESMOS marked its 40th anniversary in 1993, and the record number of applications for membership to be voted on during the last General Assembly in

Cyprus last September, is surely a sign of SYNDESMOS' vitality, in so far as it is activity which serves the aims of the Fellowship and the building up of the Church. And that is the question that we must constantly ask ourselves and ask you, SYNDESMOS members.

The VXth SYNDESMOS General Assembly in Cyprus last year saw the election of Vladimir Misijuk from Bialystok in Poland as the new SYNDESMOS Secretary-General. For those of you who have not had the pleasure of meeting him, he was one of the founders of the Fellowship of Orthodox Youth in Poland in 1980, he has organised annually the youth pilgrimage to Grabarka which gathers around 3,000 Orthodox youth. He has been involved in SYNDESMOS activities since 1983, serving on the SYNDESMOS Executive Committee since 1989. He has been particularly involved in running SYNDESMOS projects in central Europe region. Vladimir graduated from the Christian Academy of Theology in Warsaw and received a masters in Patristics under the supervision of Fr. John Meyendorff from St. Vladimir's in New York in 1991. He currently lives with his wife Tatiana in Bialystok where he has recently established the new SYNDESMOS General Secretariat.

### **Main areas of work**

Over the more recent years, SYNDESMOS has entered a new phase of growth. It is no longer limited to a small intellectual group of committed Christians, but it has become accessible to all Orthodox fellowships world-wide whose work is oriented around the basic and concrete issues of church life, catechism, keeping the young people involved in the life of the church, youth gatherings, publications and so on. The work of SYNDESMOS over the past triennium has concentrated on youth training, education and unity among the youth.

### **Youth training courses**

This programme was initiated in 1992 in response to demand for practical support on the part of SYNDESMOS member movements, in particular in Eastern Europe. The objectives of this programme were to respond to the local needs and realities and to promote practical skills to help develop organised and quality youth work on a local level. Workshop themes would cover the areas of successful fundraising and motivating a youth group, leadership skills, targeting youth, pastoral care. SYNDESMOS would offer specific training in areas such as church music, organising youth camps, Orthodox youth training etc.

In practice these seminars are also forums for exchange and learning, a time for young people to explore their own ideas, to encounter other Orthodox and to witness together the universality of the common Faith. Through this regular and focused series of training, I can say that youth have been inspired to return home and implement their new skills and to continue in the struggle to live as a Christian and serve the church. Youth groups in several regions have been established and developed links and built fruitful forms of cooperation. We now have a kind of network of compatible and cooperating groups, which are working together to find new and effective ways of serving their Churches, built on shared experience and a common love of Orthodoxy.

You may have seen in the last issue of SYNDESMOS News, the report about the training camp, which took place in Albania in July 1995. The specific theme of

this project was youth camps, for that very summer there were to be two Orthodox youth camps for the very first time since the end of the 25-year dictatorship. SYNDESMOS was able to organise experienced youth camp organisers from England and Finland, along with other participants from several other countries to spend a week with Albanian youth from all over the southern part of the country. It was a truly blessed experience and we did many other things together apart from talk about youth camps. Everyday both morning and evening, the whole group made a pilgrimage to the site of a ruined church and prayed together in our different languages. We met members of the Orthodox community, notably three old ladies, all sisters, who told us how they had risked their lives for the sake of the Orthodox faith during the regime of Enver Hohxa. We spent time with the local priest Papa Janni, one of the first indigenous people to be made a priest under the present Archbishop. We heard of how he worked in a metal factory as a young man and made crosses out of the scraps of metal that remained and laid them on the at the sites of former churches which had been destroyed, but where the faithful would go at night and light a candle and pray. When the repression subsided, many Orthodox families found that they had similar crosses and they traced them back to Papa Janni. We visited some of the historic sites of Orthodoxy, met with Archbishop Anastasios, himself a former SYNDESMOS Executive Committee member, and a deep bond of unity brought us close to young people we met there. The workshops that were held, concentrated on the practical side of camp planning and on creating a harmonious camp programme. We also talked about fundraising, and how to go about it, the types of questions that potential donors are likely to ask and how to respond in a way that is comprehensible and accessible to non-Orthodox funding bodies in order to clinch the best possible deal. We helped produce a draft programme for an Albanian National Orthodox Youth Conference. We came away feeling inspired, enriched at having witnessed the full strength of the Orthodox renewal in Albania and with prayers for our Albanian brothers and sisters on our lips for continued strength in their work for the service of the Church.

### **Orthodox Youth Education**

Education has always been a central focus for SYNDESMOS and its fundamental role is to find new ways of supporting the local work of its members particularly as regards catechism, theological learning and other issues that we are faced with in contemporary society. A particular area of educational focus has been the Orthodox response to the ecological crisis. An Orthodoxy and Ecology seminar was organised by SYNDESMOS in Romania in 1993. The seminar was supported by WWF, the World Wild Life Fund for Nature and it inspired participants to take on board the role of stewards of nature. They looked at liturgical texts together and which clearly states man's position vis a vis nature, they were given examples of ways in which they could encourage their youth organisation to be more aware of the ecological issues and in small ways respond to it. During the week they visited Orthodox monastery's with organic farms. Spiritual Ecology camps have been organised on Mount Athos for the past two years. A group of about 20 young men have gone to the Holy Mountain, and worked clearing the the overgrown and crumbling labyrinth of pathways at the same time as following the monastic Athonite rhythm of life. Support for this particular project has come from the organisation, 'Friends of Mount Athos' base in England as they recognise the valuable work that is being carried out.

An important minority of SYNDESMOS members are theological schools and with the aim of responding to their needs SYNDESMOS launched a project early last year to collect and collate a variety of materials about Orthodox theological education today. A questionnaire was sent to all member schools and Theological faculties and any more. A directory of over 100 Orthodox Theological Institutions is being prepared and a catalogue of data including lists of syllabuses and teaching programmes. The highlight of the theological education programme was the convocation of the V International Consultation of Orthodox Theological Schools in the Halki Theological School of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The presence of the Patriarch himself and the historic setting and the large gathering of Orthodox students, scholars and professors made it one of the most memorable events of the last triennium.

## **Publications and communication**

## **Finances and funding**

SYNDESMOS is not dependant on one particular source of funding; in fact in many ways it is an orphan in the Orthodox world and for its lively hood depends solely on grants and donations. Over the past 5 years, the SYNDESMOS income has undergone remarkable growth. 78% of the income has come from grants from the following three sources, the European Commission youth programmes, the Council of Europe European Youth Foundation and various offices of the World Council of Churches. Member organisations contribute approximately 5% of the budget and our Orthodox Churches contribute to about 10% of the income - the major Orthodox support is from the Church of Finland, which remains the smallest local church.

Running an office from Paris is expensive and about 15% of the budget has gone on communication costs. But the largest proportion of the budget is on the individual projects, totally at around 35% of the budget. Travel expenses remain an immense burden, both for SYNDESMOS and also for participants but are essential for our work. It is important also to mention the all the "in kind" support offered by members and churches around the world, the food and accommodation and all the other hospitality, which if we were able to measure accurately, would substantially increase the size of the annual budget. However, it is still true to say that, despite constant efforts SYNDESMOS, the only international youth organisation, working exclusively with Orthodox youth and Orthodox churches, is still not funded primarily by Orthodox sources.

## **Relations with non-Orthodox organisations**

Recognition must be given to the generous support that SYNDESMOS has received from ecumenical sources. These should not be understood as a form of dependency, but rather of Christian partnership for the up building of the Body of the Church. Funders are well disposed towards SYNDESMOS as a Christian organisation and we are not required to reform our aims

The same goes for the European Community support for specific SYNDESMOS projects, who, as I mentioned earlier have been fundamental to the budget of the last few years. Obtaining their support requires writing creative and novel project proposals, but we are not required to modify or compromise the fundamental aims of the organisation. The European Community recognises the cultural importance of SYNDESMOS's work, looking at Orthodoxy as a part of

cultural heritage of Europe. They fund projects which promote youth mobility, projects which allow time for young people to discover other cultures, other parts of the world, other languages with the aim of overcoming prejudice and racism, xenophobia and intolerance and working for a united and peaceful Europe. There is a correspondence between what we as Orthodox want to do and what the European Community and the Council of Europe want to encourage. As Alexander Belopopsky stated very clearly in his report during the last Assembly, that many people in the church are reluctant to associate faith and money in anyway, which to his mind betrays a deep fear and a misunderstanding of our incarnate faith. I share his view on what he calls "Orthodox Economics". While it is not necessary to be obsessive fund seekers, we should take advantage of the resources available at this present time, we should profit from the present willingness of other organisations to support our work, to help implement our projects and carry out our programmes and support the youth of our Orthodox Church.

### **Serve the Lord in Unity**

The theme for the new term of office. Selected by the new SYNDESMOS Board and reflects the line of thought in the opening speech of the new SYNDESMOS President where he says, "The word 'Syndesmos' means bond, a word whose meaning directly implies unity. In the English language, 'unity' is an operative element of the word 'community' - being one together. For there can be no real oneness without togetherness. Our collective oneness in Christ is the source and essence of our Syndesmos. Fragmentation and division are the very opposite of Syndesmos in that they militate against not only our personal unity with Christ but also against our comm.-unity. For this reason I see the marriage of the two concepts, unity and community as fundamental to the aim and objective of our Fellowship."

Promoting a living unity in the local Eucharist community amongst Orthodox youth is one of the fundamental aims behind all the work of SYNDESMOS. Our unity on a global and local level should reflect our deeper unity in the Eucharist, which is our source of life on this earth. SYNDESMOS has sought creative ways of supporting Orthodox youth unity around the world, international youth exchanges and pilgrimages have been a fruitful method of promoting youth unity. The first involvement of Czechoslovakia was when a small group of young people were able to attend what has now become the annual youth pilgrimage in Grabarka in Poland. Following a proposal of the XIV General Assembly to mark a special day of celebration and action for Orthodox youth, the Heads of the Orthodox Churches blessed the Feast Day of the Meeting of the Lord as the World Day of Orthodox Youth. This day has been promoted by SYNDESMOS since 1993 as a focus for local initiatives and activities, around the central iconographic encounter of old and new, and of the offering of the youth in the Temple. By encouraging the focus to be on the local Church and not on SYNDESMOS, the day has proved to be an effective symbol of an international identity, and the universality of Orthodoxy especially for Orthodox in a minority context.