

Spiritual Directors in Europe: our story

The Background

In 1991 a group of spiritual directors in the United States started a network for mutual support called *Spiritual Directors International* (SDI). This network consisted, until about 2005, of Regions, most of them with a designated contact person. There were three European Regions: the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Continental (mainland) Europe.

In 1995 I [Johan Muijtjens] finished my training as a spiritual director at the Institute for Spiritual Leadership in Chicago and before returning home I was asked to be the first regional contact person of SDI for Mainland Europe. The region had 30 members, mainly trained in the USA, living in about 10 different European countries. A second request to me was to try and foster cooperation between the three European regions.

In order to make a start I contacted the regional contact person for the UK, Rev. Gordon Jeff, and Mrs. Jeanne Estella, the regional contact for Ireland.

In 1997 a first meeting in London of myself and Gordon took place. This meeting was encouraging and ideas about ways to contact the SDI members were developed, among others a Newsletter. This encounter was followed, in 1998, by a meeting of all *three* contact persons, this time in the UK city of Bath.

At that time both in Ireland and in the UK there existed already some networks of spiritual directors. In order to make a start of a network in my own Region, I tried to contact by personal letters the members in the other European countries. For several reasons the response was minimal, but some persons, especially Maike Ewert, a Lutheran pastor in Osnabrück, Germany, offered to be of help in this process of making a network in Europe. I travelled to Osnabrück and discussed with Maike some procedures that could be tried out.

During a visit Maike paid to me in Maastricht some months later Maike proposed not to continue to try and make contact via *paper* but to invite people for a meeting, however modest in shape and size it might be. I, who from my own context had experience with the organization of international meetings, had to overcome some inner resistance, but finally Maike and I decided to invite Peter Ball for a meeting in Maastricht in June 1999 in order to see what might be feasible.

This meeting in Maastricht was wonderful and the three of us encouraged each other to make a concrete start by inviting the members of the three European SDI regions for a weekend meeting in Loccum, Northern Germany.

We envisaged that meeting as an opportunity for:

- getting to know one another
- sharing of experiences
- exchange of information and resources
- times for prayer together
- reflection on selected topics relevant to our ministry

We invited the people on the membership lists of SDI, the people in Europe who had finished the training at the Institute for Spiritual Leadership in Chicago and a number of personal contacts. And we were very curious what would be the response.

[Johan Muijtjens: The Netherlands]

I [Peter Ball] became involved in SDI some fifteen years ago and was for a while the person responsible for coordinating members in the UK, taking over from Gordon Jeff. Through this connection I was invited in 1999 by Johan Muijtjens to join in preparing a meeting for spiritual directors across Europe. I had spent some days with my son and his family in central Holland and they drove me down to Limburg where Johan, Maike Ewert and I met at Johan's home in Maastricht over a couple of days to spend time in prayer together and to plan the first meeting of what was to grow into Spiritual Directors in Europe. I remember that this first occasion was marked by the importance of our praying together and the need to be practical and work from our own experience.

[Peter Ball: UK]

While living and working in the US I [Maike Ewert] was privileged to take part in an extended spiritual guidance program at the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Direction in Bethesda, Maryland. At the end of the training the international and multi-religious network, Spiritual Directors International, was introduced. I was intrigued with their mission and became a member.

Shortly after relocating to Germany in autumn of 1995 a welcoming letter from Johan to the European SDI members arrived. Over the following years we exchanged many ideas about fostering community among European spiritual directors. Slowly the vision of a regular European ecumenical conference started to grow in my heart.

At that time ideas to bring the European countries closer together were discussed on various political levels. Yet most efforts seemed half-hearted, being born more from necessity than from conviction. On a faith level there were already some official Ecumenical church conferences with their elected representatives in place. But those meetings felt a bit like holy wrestling matches for power and leadership.

I envisioned an Ecumenical (over time perhaps even inter-religious) European conference of spiritual directors in a context of equality, respect and tolerance for our different traditions, deeply embedded in the history of our countries, an atmosphere of open listening and sharing as sisters and brothers in faith, who are responding to the same calling. Through the centuries all European countries have been at war with one another at one time or another. Praying together, celebrating the Eucharist together, sharing our stories and our ministries would foster community and healing on a deeper level not just for us, but for the people we serve.

When I shared this vision with Johan who was experienced in setting up international conferences, responded sympathetically, but carefully and reluctantly. He invited Peter Ball and myself to Maastricht to ponder more on the idea. We spent a lovely weekend together and after prayerful consideration decided to give it a try. I was happy to host the first conference at Kloster Loccum, a former Cistercian monastery close to the city of Hanover in Lower Saxony that now serves as seminary of our Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hanover. Peter, Johan and I agreed to call the meeting a success, if eight people showed up.....

[Maike Ewert: Germany]

The First Meeting: Loccum 2000

Twenty four people registered to attend, though three had to back out because of illness. People came from countries ranging from Ireland to Bavaria, Finland to Malta, with English as the conference language. Catholics were in the majority with a number of Lutherans from Germany and Finland and two Anglicans. There were clergy from all three denominations, a strong representation of Catholic religious sisters and brothers and five lay people. Several of the members were psychologists or psychotherapists by profession. Women outnumbered men by thirteen to eight.

From 18-21 February 2000 twenty one people from eight countries, met near Hannover in the beautiful setting of Kloster Loccum for an ecumenical conference on spiritual direction. The beauty of the venue and its spiritual history as a mediaeval Cistercian monastery, now a Lutheran seminary, contributed much to the depth of our work.

The three organisers had designed a programme flexible enough to meet the (largely unknown) needs of participants and at the same time provide a secure structure.

Plenary sessions included an opening session in order to get to know each other a bit and to share our needs. These included the opportunity for deepening our ministry; for companionship, spiritual direction and intervision by colleagues, and to hear the experiences of others and to learn from the diversity in the group.

In a second plenary session Peter Ball presented a map of the ways people pray and introduced ways of accompanying people in contemplative prayer.

Other plenary topics responded to the group's suggestions. Periods of prayer together before breakfast, at midday and early evening offered times of silence, symbol and movement.

Most of the session opened with a time for silent reflection. There were two Eucharists, one led by the three Catholic priests and one led by the three Lutheran women pastors present.

The second morning's main activity, suggested by Henry Morgan, who advocated that '*the whole meeting might be in an atmosphere that characterizes a session of spiritual direction*', was a turning point in the conference journey. Members met in *confidential groups of three* ('triads') for an hour and a half to tell and to listen to each other's stories. This exercise in the actual work of spiritual direction helped everyone to find an energy and vision which was seen to be lacking before in the meeting.

Smaller groups met round specific themes and *workshops* (on training and training opportunities, on spiritual direction and psychotherapy and counselling, and on direction in a pastoral setting) gave the chance for people to share interests and exchange ideas. A quick session in *regional groups* produced suggestions for future work together.

At the closing *evaluation* it was clear that many of the needs expressed at the beginning had been met and that some hopes had been fulfilled. Meeting others across national and church boundaries proved a real gift. Many saw in the event a symbol of hope for unity: when people are open to the Spirit and work together. Meeting each other in trust and openness was enriching and invigorating.

There was gratitude, too, that the members had been enabled to take responsibility for much of the conference as it proceeded, which gave a sense of positive collaboration.

Some people valued the aspect of input and regretted that there was not more through the days. Others felt there could with advantage have been more times of silence or quiet exchanges with each other.

Negative responses related to the problems which arose from not knowing exact costs beforehand (and that in a foreign currency); difficulties in finding the place and in making contact by phone; a long and tiring session the first evening at the end of a long day's travel; and for some a sense of exclusion due to working in what was for them a foreign language.

The weekend at Kloster Loccum proved a place of peace and space where we were able to share deep things and be truly present to ourselves and to each other. By the second day a community had been formed, stories had been shared, we had prayed together and new friendships had been made.

Before we parted, a new group had accepted responsibility for arranging a second meeting. The suggestion was that it probably should be in Belgium, probably in February 2001.

[Johan Muijtjens]

The Lutheran seminary at Loccum had been a Cistercian monastery before the Reformation, so it was in a beautiful situation, in the valley of a small river running through the property and flanked by forest.

The buildings were comfortable and we worked hard to provide a warm welcome for the twenty one people who took part. It was at this first meeting that we began to work to the principle that most of the resources we were likely to need for a conference were to be found within the group. Although we have over the years invited speakers from the country in which we have met, the strength of the meeting from Loccum onwards has been in the lived experience of the members. So the programme has been heavily weighted towards time for meeting one another, for sharing stories and beliefs, with provision made for worship and prayer in common. I was deeply impressed by the way this all worked with a group of strangers from several different countries.

Silence played a large part. Johan introduced each session with a few minutes of quiet before the business, occasionally broken by the snores of a dear old Boxer bitch sleeping under the chair of her Bavarian mistress. Among the most effective exercises was the time given to work in groups of three, talking and listening to each other about the real events, problems and joys in our life and ministry.

Normally, as a natural extrovert, I thrive on conferences and meeting new people and at Loccum I really enjoyed the international fellowship. But there came a moment when I felt just couldn't take any more; so I went out for a sharp walk through the forest and enjoyed the paths through the beautiful trees and, above all, finding a glade filled with a flock of chirruping siskins. That really made my day.

For me one of the signs of the value and indeed the success of this first meeting came in the final session. We were thinking and talking about a second meeting the following year.

Johan asked who would be willing to join a working party to plan for this and -- unheard of in any church meeting -- six people put their hands up to volunteer!

A different memory carried away with me was coming down after our farewell session into the entrance lobby and finding it thick with cigarette, pipe and cigar smoke -- so thick I thought it must be an AA meeting. But no, it was a meeting of the local clergy chapter.

[Peter Ball]

The second meeting : Drongen, Belgium, 2001

I have a photographic memory which relies more on images, moving experiences and visual treasures to recall the past. This is not always the best foundation for recording an event where there were many participants.

As I write I am looking at a photograph of the Drongen gathering and count 24 people as present. Oude Abdij Abbey a few miles outside Ghent has a long history much of this as a Jesuit residence and Novitiate. We occupied a large quadrangle of classic buildings with high ceilings and large windows. It was a cold February with snow on the ground during our stay. We had large airy bedrooms with cold water only available in the wash basins! Getting from one place to another required us to walk in the glass passage skirting the quadrangle. I can still see the beautiful cyclamen plants which adorned the windowsills. There was a huge gothic style church attached to the complex. One day we formed a procession singing ancient texts as we made our way to the Church. On another very cold day I led an outdoor meditation on the Prayer of Six Directions in the tradition of the native North American people. Everyone wrapped up and joined in this memorable prayer experience. There were wonderful grounds with large trees and duck ponds. I enjoyed many moments wandering in this wonderland.

Our main meeting room was a comfortable room with wood panels and had a blue carpet. I remember a session when Christa Gaiser and Eike Uebe, from Bavaria in Germany, led us in a reflection of the Emmaus story. Triad groups for Spiritual Direction session were included and greatly valued. These were the early days of SDE and certain elements now much treasured had not yet made their appearance. The programme had no cultural content reflecting Belgium's heritage although I remember that some Finnish participants managed to slip out to see the Van Eyck triptych of the Adoration of the Lamb in Ghent. The evening hospitality sessions happened but were only a pale shadow of present generous provisions!

I am sure that at least half the participants are now staunch key members of today's SDE. Johan, Henry, Sisko, Peter Ball and Maike Ewert all smile out from the photo. The programme was prepared by Johan, Eike, Martica van der Meer, a Belgian Franciscan priest Luk Coppejans, and myself. It was short 3 night meeting and the richness of today's programmes was still in its infancy. There was a sense of excitement and enthusiasm in being part of a new venture. Good memories.

[Maureen Farrell FCJ: UK]

The third meeting : Finland 2002

The meeting house was the Educational Institute of the Finnish Lutheran Church in Jarvenpaa, quite near Helsinki. The Institute is by a small lake. The area was very important for Finnish culture a hundred years ago. Many artists and writers lived there, including the very famous composer Jean Sibelius.

The SDE-conference visited the Sibelius House and heard about him, Finnish music and art. Finland became independent from Russia in 1917, and there is much national and patriotic music written by Sibelius from that time. The SDE-people got a very good summary insight into Finnish history and culture.

In the Conference one theme was very interesting for me. It was the prayer in body language. Patricia taught spiritual direction by dance, movements and gestures. For instance she taught the 'Our Father' using Tai-Chi movements.

Every guest or tourist who visits Finland should go to a sauna. In Jarvenpaa there were many of the participants who dared to go to sauna near the lake. The Finns build their saunas on the shore of a lake or the sea, when possible. Then you can go to swim from the

sauna. Even in the winter. You make a hole in the ice and go to swim. The temperature of the air outside the house can be minus 10 – 20 degrees, the water is plus 1 – 4. So, the water is warm! This swimming has very beneficial effects.

There were only a few foreign SD-people in who dared to go to swimming after the sauna. One of them was Christine Head. She got a diploma for this. She has said that the diploma has been in her office. So, she can show her clients that she is very good, well-trained and brave spiritual director.

[Sisko Raitis: Finland]

The fourth meeting: France, 2003

Around November 2002 I got a mail from Johan giving me some information about himself and SDE and asking me if I could give some time to help them to have a meeting in France. He had got my name from Maureen Farrell (England) one of the first members to join the group. I answered that I never heard about SDE, that indeed I had been formed to be a spiritual director, and that I was working with students but that it was not my main work, that I had plenty of work to do and that I was not looking for any more jobs! And finally that I was not the person he was looking for. That was a good introduction in 2002!

He wrote back saying that I was just the “right” person he was looking for, and asked me to settle a meeting in Paris. So I met Johan, Henry and Sisko. Oh la, la!!

Think that I was born in a catholic family, in catholic surroundings, and in a catholic country, so my knowledge about ecumenism was non existent! I learnt in History about our religion wars, but I never met people of another Church! I had been living a few years in England but did not get to know other people but Catholics. So, everything was new, I was amazed to meet so beautiful people, I must have surprised them with all my questions, and disagreement of things!! Any way, I listened, suggested, arranged things, we had a good preparatory meeting, enjoyed French food and drinks and this lovely company.

We decided we would have the meeting in Versailles, in the Cenacle Sister’s Spiritual Center,

The language was not so easy for me, as I do not use English in ordinary life, I remember a difficulty about understanding the meaning of “French spirituality” which really meant “culture” for me ... Finally, we organized a visit to Versailles Castle and its magnificent and elegant settings, our group was able to grasp a bit of what is the power of money to make beauty, while poor people were dying of hunger! That was a good learning.

I was surprised that we did not have any “input” during our meeting and was sorry about that, I was not used to go to such workshops. I reacted negatively at spiritual direction in trials, but once it was done, I was really moved and appreciative. We also had beautiful celebrations in different ways according to the Churches and people. I really appreciated those various beautiful, creative services.

Two members from SDI invited themselves to our meeting: The American director Liz Budd Ellmann and another member whose name I forgot... At the time SDI seemed to wish to keep control over SDE, it was not clear, as Europe is international, but far from the U.S. and we felt that we had to be independent...

When I agreed to help SDE I thought it would be just for one year. And as you see, I have gone on year after year, because these meetings enriched me, widened my knowledge of other Churches, made it a reality and I have got to appreciate the beautiful spiritual and warm people I meet, the beautiful countries I visited. And for this I thank my God each time I pray, and when I pray for all it is with joy.

[Marie-Geneviève Renaud: France]

The fifth meeting: Denmark, 2004

In 2004 Denmark hosted the annual meeting at The Catholic Church Conference building Magleås situated north of Copenhagen surrounded by a little lake and a smaller forest. The meeting took place late February with lovely snow and sunshine. Since the start of SDE in Loccum – where s. Emma Martensen had participated, because she (and later 3 other sisters of Saint Joseph) had been trained in spiritual direction and retreat work in USA(Chicago and Boston and Canada) by Jesuits Institutions. I came back from my own 2 years of formation to be a spiritual director in August 2002 and my first meeting was in

France 2003. I felt this was really a forum for me as a spiritual director not so much for the knowledge but much more for my own soul and deepening the experience of being in this ministry. Walking with one another in a prayerful and unstressful way, through what we share in a very open and understanding way. So when it was decided that Denmark was the next stop I was asked by my sisters to coordinate the meeting.

I believe a little less than 30 people turned up and we shared the Danish spiritual roots by inviting a former actor now Catholic priest Finn Arve to talk about Hans Christian Andersen. He also gave us a performance of two of Andersens fairy tales "The dying child" and "The story of a mother". Each participant had also brought an important story from her/his own culture and we shared this in smaller groups.

We each wrote and shared a description in no more than 15 words of our understanding of spiritual direction. We also discussed in smaller groups: "what helps each of us personally and keeps us alive while we are ministering to others?" it is these sorts of conversations that make these meeting so unique and special. The question where and how the organization should continue also had its place. I believe that this first step really to make SDE a "legal" Organization was decided in Denmark.

This meeting's success was a result of working well together with the 4 board members and the sisters of Saint Joseph who took charge of many practical and personal things.

[S.Susanne Hoyos CSJ: Denmark]

The sixth meeting: Lithuania 2005

I became familiar with SDE in 2004. Some people from Lithuania had contacts with Johan Muijtens and he invited a Lithuanian spiritual director to come to the annual meeting 2004 held in Denmark. I was asked by my colleague spiritual directors to go there, so I went. I was touched by the warm and deeply involving atmosphere of the gathering in Denmark. At that moment SDE was discerning "to turn to the East", that is - to open the membership possibilities to the spiritual directors from Eastern and Central Europe. The best move seemed to go to one of the countries there. Hence the next annual meeting was held in Lithuania, Druskininkai.

During one of the preparatory meetings in Vilnius, SDE as a legal body was founded. The meeting in Druskininkai was held in the beginning of March 2005, with Lithuania still covered in snow. Lithuanians shared their culture and spirituality by telling stories of their country and presenting the heritage of the famous artist and composer M.K. Čiurlionis. One of the symbols of this meeting was a typical image of suffering Christ "Rupintojelis". It reflects our painful historical experiences in this country and speaks of a God who sits with us in our sorrow, feels our pain, takes our burden and patiently listens.

[Ligita Ryliskyte: Lithuania]

The seventh meeting: Czech Republic 2006

In December 2005, just three months before the SDE-meeting in Lithuania, I received a communication from Johan Muijtens. Since I did not know Johan and what SDE meant, Johan explained himself and the organization he was chairing at that time. He clarified the particular background for the connection to me: as SDE was trying to establish contacts in Central/Eastern-Europe, S.Regina König CSJ, a Sister of St. Joseph from Denmark and a participant in the SDE meetings had responded to Johan by offering "her sisters" in the Czech Republic. Johan's mail was quite a surprise to me, leaving me with the question how to respond. For some time I prayed about the situation and then decided to follow Johan's invitation to "come and see". Subsequently I attended the meeting in Lithuania in March 2005. It was then clear, that I would make an attempt to arrange the next SDE -meeting in the Czech Republic in February 2006. The first step was to find a small, local team that would cooperate with the SDE-leadership group. Tim and Ivana Noble from Prague were a true gift from heaven as cornerstones of the local SDE-group. Together with Ivana and Tim we felt confident to set up the first meeting in the Czech Republic. As venue we chose the Franciscan Spiritual Center in Vranov u Brna in Moravia. (Duchovní centrum svatého Františka z Pauly, www.dc-vranov.katolik.cz). A core of the meeting was the encounter with Jan Konzal, a secretly ordained bishop in the underground church of Czechoslovakia. Sharing the life and the faith experience of Jan touched us deeply.

The Czech group was rather large with about 10 participants. Also the “Sister” of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, was represented with two people. In spite of icy winds and lots of snow outside, the atmosphere was warm, prayerful, very open and sincere. The meeting brought many blessings and fulfilled its purpose. The experience of the prophet Isaiah became a reality for SDE: “Widen the space of your tent, extend the curtains of your home, do not hold back! Lengthen your ropes; make your tent-pegs firm” (54, 2). SDE established itself in a central part of Europe and a solid local group had been formed in the Czech Republic.

[Gisela Heitz CSJ: The Czech Republic]

The eighth meeting: Hungary 2007

My getting in touch with the SDE was a kind of miracle for me. I got a forwarded message from a friend of mine; it was an invitation to the meeting in Hungary. But, the original sender insists that he never saw this letter. Anyway, I was eager to apply, since I got my spiritual director training in an international and ecumenical setting, and after coming home, I really missed that atmosphere.

Soon, I got a reply from Johan, and his letter contained a request, too: Would I be willing to participate in the preparation of the meeting? Of course, my answer was “yes”, but – saying the truth – I thought that it would be a little practical help, like waiting for people at the airport or something like that. So, I was quite surprised when I met the Executive Committee sometime in the autumn.

My first surprise was the location: the brand new retreat house of the SVD fathers, very-very far from the inner city of Budapest. I could hardly find it. When I finally got there, I stumbled into a man digging in the totally empty and muddy garden. I thought he was a gardener, but it turned out that he was the SVD Provincial.

My second surprise was the Executive Committee. It was great to see Lutheran, Anglican and Catholic persons - in addition from North-, Western-, Eastern-Europe and England - working peacefully and joyfully together. This is not a thing I could see every day in Hungary! I was specially touched by the fact that they did not simply want to organize a meeting in Hungary, but they wanted to do it in that way which would be somehow a help for the Hungarian spiritual directors, too. I felt immediately that this was that kind of business which I would certainly like to contribute to.

Finally, my third surprise was that that there was no fixed program yet, and a part of it, namely the opening worship and the cultural input, was supposed to be done by the Hungarian group, but I was the only one Hungarian applicant at that time. Though we already had Krisztián, a young SVD brother, who was a great help for us in practical things like computer work and driving, I had to find some people who were involved in spiritual direction and who would be willing to work in the preparation of the meeting.

I looked around in my acquaintances, and I was very grateful that Margit, Elemér, Kati and her husband, Endi said “yes” to my first invitation. I felt we made up a good team: Margit - as a literature teacher – had great ideas for the cultural input, and as a school sister – knew everybody whom we could involve in the realization of it. Kati and Endi were able to do everything which needed a good knowledge of English language; Krisztián made a nice map and organized the transportation from and to the airport, and he was a kind of host in the retreat house; Elemér and I did all the other bits and pieces which had to be done before and during the meeting.

As far as I remember, the meeting went mostly smoothly and peacefully. I think the special Hungarian contribution to SDE was letting people take a look into our way of thinking: we proceed from the bigger, more general reality toward the smaller, more specific one. This direction appears even in the spiritual direction setting: we tend to proceed from the communal reality toward the personal relationship with God; maybe we have a stronger sense of being defined by our relationships.

I truly enjoyed every moment of our being together, but to me, the most touching moment was the common prayer for our country. We were only a few months after the 50th anniversary of our revolution against the communist regime when the peacefully celebrating crowd was brutally attacked by the police, and we were only a few days before another national feast-day. The people were divided; the atmosphere was very tense, at least in the capital. I don't remember which one of us talked to whom about this situation, but we were deeply moved by the idea of praying together for Hungary. I believe that also this prayer

contributed to the fact that nothing brutal happened on our national feast-day in March. I still cherish the altar-cloth signed by everyone during the opening worship and on which the petitions and good wishes were written during this prayer.

Regarding the whole meeting in Hungary, I think it was a great experience for all of us who participated in it from Hungary, most of us are still in touch with each other and became members of SDE.

[Zsuzsanna Laczko: Hungary]

The ninth meeting: Spain 2008

I had the great gift of attending my first SDE meetings in 2006 at Vranov. I remember the feelings I had during my trip to Wien to meet people for the first time, without a face but with the same heart feelings I could imagine: honesty, involved in helping other people in the Lord research, and interested in building bridges between different ways of life our faith. I gave thanks to the Lord for that success because today I'm involved with joy in the SDE projects and mission.

I remember when Johan asked me to take part of the panel in order to tell something about the Ignatian way of spiritual direction. In my poor English I talked more about "accompaniment" than "spiritual direction".

I couldn't participate in the meeting in Hungary but I had the great gift to offer the 2008 SDE's Meeting at my home in St. Ignatius Retreat House at Manresa. I was very happy that I could offer Manresa for the Meeting. I remember joyfully the preparatory meetings with Johan, Raili, Ligita and Henry in August and October '07. My opinion about the group was confirmed: SDE is a blessed family and not only a group of friends involved in the same mission.

At the beginning of March '08 took place the Meeting in Manresa. After the warm welcome of Fr. Manuel Casanova (who prayed for us from God's side) the meeting started. I remember specially the silent day (I think that was the first time it was included in the meeting), the visit to Montserrat and to the Ignatian places at Manresa, guided for Fr. Manuel Casanova and Xavier Melloni and the Lutheran Eucharist presided by Anne-Grette Hagen.

The workshops were very interesting: some were about the new languages in the faith paths. People from Manresa led some of the workshops and others were led by members of SDE. Some people remained two or three days more after the meeting to visit Barcelona.

[Josep M Bullich sj: Spain]

The tenth meeting: The Netherlands 2009

I became a member of SD-Europe in 2006, while visiting the 7th meeting in Vranov, Czech Republic. Since that time I was able to join the annual meetings and was happy that the 10th meeting took place in one of the retreat houses of my congregation, Wahlwiller, in The Netherlands.

It just happened at the right time, because in 2008 "GAANDEWEG", the first organization for Spiritual Directors in Belgium and the Netherlands had been founded and the meeting of SD-Europe in the Netherlands was an especially good opportunity for members of GAANDEWEG to come together in order to prepare and organize the meeting with a suitable number of representatives of SDE. The preparation went fine with great cooperation and effort of a core team of around 10 Dutch spiritual directors.

The theme "A free Spirit" expressed the dynamic of these days. A (too) short visit to Maastricht brought us in contact with part of Dutch history, especially with the still difficult process of ecumenical movement between Catholics and Protestants.

There was some disagreement in the Dutch core team while preparing the program for the "cultural day". After having heard the famous Prof. Dr. Kees Waaijman we looked for a creative way of deepening his lecture by painting together. Because we were a bit late in approaching the possible artists who could help us in this, the costs for the materials was quite high. On the day itself it happened to be a nice exercise, but not really in depth as we had thought or wanted it to become, where the question remained with some of us whether it was worth all the (material) effort done. This has been a concrete learning what living in a free spirit means, that is to allow each other the space to disagree and find compromises,

while continuing to remain in dialogue with and working together in a remaining good atmosphere.

A special contribution and colour of the meeting in Wahlwiller according to me was the life-giving social-cultural party at Sunday night, where the participants shared sketches, dances, songs, poems or stories from their countries. I would say that the overall colour of that meeting was warm and personal and we encountered each other on the heart level. It was a 'binding together meeting', which had especially lasting repercussions on the Dutch group.

During the meeting we elected the new chairperson of SD-Europe, and the way it went made it clear to me that we need to look into the 'how' of our election-procedure. The way the election went in Wahlwiller has left some painful memories in some of the people involved. The election procedure was already in former meetings discussed and questioned. For me we seriously need to look into it for the future.

At the end of the meeting I was asked to call my fellow sisters who took care of us during the meeting for a word of thank you. With some hesitation, because of their lack of English, they were coming, but then none of the group said anything to them. Luckily one of the sisters themselves started to thank the group - while actually it should have been the other way round. It was a short moment of embarrassment, for them, and also for me. I know that these things just happen sometimes, despite all the effort and good will of all.

These are some of my reflections on that meeting, spontaneously written down. Thinking back there is a feeling of joy and connectedness in me, the awareness of deepening relationships with each other, while at the same time there are also some experiences or aspects which make me think and reflect about. It leaves me with some open questions. Actually - if we only collect our "success stories", we would not be true to ourselves. Life is light *and* shadow. I am grateful that I experienced both during that meeting.

[Claudia Theinert: The Netherlands]