

Ruth Epting (1919 - 2016)



ECUMENICAL FORUM OF EUROPEAN CHRISTIAN WOMEN

FORUM OECUMENIQUE DE FEMMES CHRETIENNES D'EUROPE

ÖKUMENISCHES FORUM CHRISTLICHER FRAUEN IN EUROPA

*As you were in the ebb and flow,
as the beginning becomes the ending,
and the ending a new beginning,
be with us
everpresent God.*

Kate McIlhagga, Scotland

We commemorate in honour

**Pastor Dr. h.c. Ruth Epting
Honorary President
of the Ecumenical Forum of
European Christian Women
9 June 1919 – 15 June 2016**



Ruth Epting 2009. Photo: Meehyun Chung

Ruth Epting was born in 1919 in Basel/Switzerland, where her father was working in the house of the Basel mission. She grew up in this compound, went to primary school there, then to the Gymnasium and matriculated in 1938. Her father was German, living in Switzerland and her mother was Swiss, born in India. They had worked together in Ghana, where they met.

The times of National Socialism

After her matriculation Ruth would have liked to become a nurse or a teacher and to go the mission field, but this was impossible. With her German nationality she could not take any state examination in Switzerland. And her father did not want her to study, as his view was that women should marry. But Ruth found a way to study minor theology in Berlin. She came into the heart of the Confessing Church of which Rev. Martin Niemoeller was a prominent advocate. Her teachers were pastors who did not accept the official German church set up by the National Socialists and had been expelled by their own congregations. Later, after the war, those pastors became bishops.

Ruth described these times as times in which you had to decide which values were important for you. The questions permeated Bible study, church history, even prayer, for those who were in the concentration camps. She learnt to trust in God, and not only get an education. The SS occasionally infiltrated the group, as a spy. Some pastors were imprisoned. There were also some women pastors teaching her study group. One of them was Anna Paulsen, one of the first woman theologians in Germany. She provided an example and gave Ruth the assurance that she was not on the wrong path.

Ruth studied Greek at home, in the hope she could study theology later. Her youngest brother, a pastor, was taken into the German army, though he did not swear the oath of allegiance to Hitler. He died in Russia in 1941. After this her father said: maybe you have to study theology in his place.

Theology studies – without any female colleagues

In 1942 Ruth started to study theology in Basel, which was very well known at the time, since Karl Barth was there, having been expelled from Germany because of his opposition to National Socialism. She finished in 1946, as the only woman in her year throughout the course.

During her ordination training her mother was very ill. Therefore Ruth could not go to another city to take up a charge as she had to look after her mother. She cared for her and had the responsibility for a household of six persons beside her practical work in a congregation of Basel.

Her father promised “I will never come under your preaching”. But finally he did come to hear her preach, the first time and every time after that.

YWCA

During the war Ruth had been the contact person for the YWCA in Geneva and the centre in Berlin. After the death of her mother, she became a travelling secretary of the Burckhardtshaus from 1948 till 1953. Her job was to build up a central house in the Western part of Germany, for youth work in the three occupied sections of Germany. In 1947 she gained Swiss nationality, so she could go from one section to the other with her Swiss visa. In 1952/53 Ruth worked in the camps for foreign refugees in Germany, mainly from Eastern Europe. After a year she had to go back to Switzerland because her father was dying. Back home in Switzerland she was not allowed to be elected by a public vote in a congregation because she was a woman (this was changed only in 1957).

Then Ruth got a call from the psychiatric clinic in Basel to be a pastor until they could find a man. Finally Ruth started studying psychology in the C.G. Jung institute, which included practical work in the University hospital.

The election of women pastors

In 1953 Ruth became president of the YWCA in Switzerland. One and a half years later she was called to a pastorate in a congregation, although she could not yet be elected. Together with other women theologians and with the Board of the Church of Basel she campaigned for the election of women. In 1957 the new constitution of the Church, which allowed celibate women to be elected, was accepted by a vote of the men. Women were allowed to vote and be elected in the Church long before women’s suffrage in the canton. It was only in 1971 that women got the right to vote throughout Switzerland. In 1960 there were all together three congregations in the Swiss Reformed Church in Basel that had elected women pastors for the first time.

Women in leadership

Ruth always challenged her church with the question, why the idea of women in leadership is so strange. She noticed that this was not only a theological but also a psychological and social question. In 1972 her studies about this question were published under the title “Für die Freiheit frei – Der Weg der Frau in Kirche und Gesellschaft” (Free for Freedom – the Way of Woman in Church and Society) in Zurich.

In 1974 Ruth got a full time job in the Basel Mission House where she had been a member of the executive committee since 1961. She was secretary for women's work in three continents: Asia, Latin America and Africa. She trained candidates for mission, and had the task of changing the institute for missionaries. Her task was to develop a centre for encounter between people of third and first worlds.

Consultation of European women in Brussels

Through her director, who was linked to the WCC, Ruth was called to help in preparing women for the WCC meeting in Nairobi. This was the first time that women could speak in a WCC conference. After Nairobi Brigalia Bam, the secretary for the cooperation of men and women in the WCC, asked Ruth to moderate the consultation of European women to be held in 1978 in Brussels. Following Vatican II Catholic women (Catherina Halkes among them) had invited Madeleine Barot and other women from the WCC, from all parts of Europe to the Women's Ecumenical Liaison Group (WELG). They had meetings together during and after the Vaticanum. WELG was disbanded by Rome in 1972 with the argument, that women could join in lay groups and that they did not need a special network.

Catherina Halkes pushed within the WCC that they should take the initiative to form a network for women from all confessions. The women's desk was already there, but without Catholic women. She also pushed for a gathering of European women. At the Consultation in Brussels in 1978, they elected women from all over Europe: from German speaking and Benelux countries, Central and Eastern, Northern and Southern Europe and Great Britain, plus one Catholic woman, Jacqui Stuyt. The aim was to find out how to form a movement for women in Europe. Jacqui went to Rome and Rome said that a woman's council would be impossible and dangerous. So Rome proposed that it would be called a Forum.

The Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women (EFECW)

It took four years to draw up a constitution according to Swiss law, under which Ruth was elected convenor. After a pre-conference in 1981 the founding of the Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women (EFECW) took place in 1982.

By 1986 Ruth was ready to retire and wanted to hand over responsibility for the Forum, but instead she was made an honorary president and was actively involved in all the following meetings up to the NC Meeting in Vienna in 2013, which was Ruth's last European Forum meeting that she attended. As an honorary president Ruth always maintained a supportive supervising role.

Ruth's resume of the Forum

The Forum was the right place to share the idea of being interconfessional, although this was not easy as, Europe had been torn to pieces by all the wounds of the war and by the Iron Curtain. At first the Forum worked in geographical regions, but the crucial moment for the Forum came in 1990 in York, following the opening of the former Soviet borders. From that moment on the Forum changed its leading structure and elected three co-presidents, representing each denominational family and with an appropriate regional distribution.

In the following years the Forum attracted new member countries (currently more than 30), held General Assemblies, National Coordinators' Meetings and Neighbourhood Meetings, adapting its structure to cope with the challenges in churches and society.

Ruth was a pioneer and a visionary leader; she was a prophet who kept a clear focus on the essential questions in church and society, which she always strongly linked with peace-building, creating justice and showing solidarity through a personal faith.

May she rest in peace in the eternal glory of God.

Asea Raylean	Co-President, orthodox
Eva Guldanova	Co-President, protestant
Gabriele Kienesberger	Co-President, catholic



Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women www.efecw.net

Sources: Three Generations – with energy and vision. 30 Years Ecumenical Forum of European Christian Women 1982-2012. <http://www.efecw.net/publications/efecw-anniversary-book.html>