This was not my first experience with the Council of World Mission, but it was definitely one of the best.

I’ve been flown to the Netherlands, Johannesburg in South Africa, and South Korea, participating in a European Youth programme, helping to organise the Global Youth Forum, and stewarding for the Global General Assembly. Additionally, I was sent to the South of France by Churches Together England, to participate in their ‘Festival of Paradise,’ think of a European, Catholic Greenbelt, with less mud but more mass.

The origin of the programme

It was in South Africa, that a very passionate group of young, European participants were put in a room and told to come up with regional programmes we could deliver based on issues that were occurring in our countries; we were given just over an hour to do this. The week long Global Youth Forum tested us all, morally, intellectually and also our faith, alongside it being jam packed and slightly exhausting physically too, so we were very ready to rant, rage, and fiercely discuss together. What came out of this meeting were two broad areas that we felt the church needed to be involved in helping; young people and their mental health, and the refugee and asylum seeker crisis. Intimate stories were told, tears shed, and compassionate discussions took place over these areas of concern and incidentally, CWM Europe created two programmes entitled ‘Beyond myself in exploring migration,’ and ‘Beyond myself in exploring mental health.’ You’re too late for the first one, you missed out my friend.
What, why, who and where? Beyond myself in exploring migration was held in the Yorkshire Dales. My first thought when CWM invited me to participate in this programme was to question why on earth they picked Yorkshire; firstly, that’s way too North for me, it’s cold and it’s very farmy, I’m completely a city person. BUT it trampled all over exotic mission experiences I’ve been so lucky to participate in. Partly the success was due to the lovely group of young adults that participated in this programme with me, from the Netherlands, Jess from the URC, and few Congregationalists, we all got on really well and that is always so important. However, mostly it was so good because we were there for a reason, we went to the Yorkshire Dales to connect with a group called DARE from Darwin, who work with asylum seekers and refugees and come to the Dales through a charity called ‘People and the Dales’ who organise for refugees and asylum seekers to come to the countryside for a few days to get away from their hostile and difficult lives in the UK.

I know that was a lot of information, but let me break this down a little for you. So, we went as our little Christian group, with Wayne and Sai as the designated adults, but who just joined in with us so it was lovely. We had a few days to ‘bond’ together, exploring the dales, cooking together, wandering round cute little villages, and going to a local church, before we met Judy. Judy is insane, she works for this charity who give the asylum seekers and refugees a little retreat I guess you call it, and she’s so passionate about what she does and positive and smiley she really enhanced our experienced. So then, after a little talk from Judy explaining why she does what she does and giving us some background on the refugee, asylum crisis we joined with the other group in their bunkhouse.
Building bonds

We were tasked with some games to play together to try and break the ice before we got stuck into our packed programme. Two truths and lie was played along with some traditional Dutch games, a snowball fight and an animal game (obviously) and even though some the group’s English wasn’t perfect we gelled very quickly. The activities on the first day included willow weaving, hay bale making (not my favourite), and mosaic making. We were split into groups and chatted and helped each other complete our crafts. It was lovely to find out about their lives and talk about little things, that don’t really matter too. They cooked for our group that night, cooking a lovely chicken curry for us that we all ate together. We went back to our bunkhouse quite late and relaxed (some of us may have gone to the pub)
Creating connections

The next day was a venturing day. We did some conservation work with some red squirrels, oh my are they cute, like baby pokemon; picked up some evil flowers; and broke down and remade a dry stone wall, obviously chatting throughout the processes. The night consisted of the DARE group coming to our bunkhouse. We served dinner and a Ceilidh band joined us. We enjoyed Ceilidh together and everyone taught each other their traditional dances, we learnt an Afgani dance (we still can’t work out how that man looked so beautiful and elegant, whilst we fumbled about), a dance from Iran, from Pakistan, Syria, the Netherlands and one from Wales, and very accurate my rendition of Welsh folk dancing was. Everyone was in stitched the whole night, nobody was afraid to make a fool out of themselves and everybody got stuck in, how unBritish the British dance got. I even found out one of the guys (the Afgani man) also did Taekwondo in his former country, so we trained together on the grass. Little connections like this, and happy, giggle filled conversations are really what made up this trip and made it so special. The last day was spent climbing a mountain, where feeling really comfortable with each other we discovered all about each others lives and chatted for hours. We then had a few days after the DARE group left, we went caving, had a boat cruise and reflected on our time.
Breaking down barriers

The people we met were incredible, inspiration and really just quite lovely. The hostile environment that our government is creating towards asylum seekers and refugees really seems just absurd when you actually learn about and spend time with these wonderful people, who usually have to flee their countries because of fear of persecution. Sometimes it’s hard to communicate with ‘the other,’ they seem just too different, and perhaps like they don’t belong here. However. All idea of that completely changed when one of the participants from Vietnam, who had very poor English, was seventeen, and his friends said he seemed to be glued to his phone; who really did not come here in a safe or enjoyable way; put his phone down and played stupid games with us, laughing along and messing around with us, and joining in all the activities. Imagine being torn away from your life here and being put in a strange new country, without even being able to communicate properly, I think you’d feel very anxious and nervous and probably would be attached to your phone too. Yet when I added this guy on Instagram his stories were filled with happy faces, dances, laughing, games and positive messages. He really did benefit from this experience and so did I by meeting him.

‘When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. (Leviticus 19:33-34)’
Life-changing learning

You can be flown to a completely new culture for a mission programme and find out things about yourself you didn’t know before. You can also talk to a stranger in your home town, who comes from elsewhere, and learn more about yourself than you knew before. Mission is not going out, mission is going beyond, there’s love that needs to be spread here, and I’m so glad I learnt that from this experience.

You can benefit from these experiences too. The next programme ‘Beyond myself in exploring mental health’ is bringing together young Christians from around Europe and mental health experts to explore the issues surrounding mental health and young people, and working together to try and find a solution that we can implement in our home churches, youth groups or sports clubs. This is held over two weekends, I’m going, and if you care about mental health this experience will be so worthwhile to you. The details can be found on the URC Children and Youth Facebook page. If any CWM, URC Regional, WCC, any experiences like this interest you, I really would encourage you to apply. You will never have a bad time, and although you’ll be tested, you always walk away knowing yourself, and our relationship with God a little bit more.