

CHAPTER 16: THE EURO-CONTI'S SAGA

Now let's go back to 1986. Finally after 10 years of experimentation with our pre-Conti-group Disciple (we kept Disciple, a year-team on the road till 2000, as all possible experiments and try-outs were done and the reason for this ministry was fulfilled) we understood all the ins and outs and the cross-cultural principles. So now it seemed the time to act and the first EUROPEAN Continental group was launched. This group was for on the road for 6 weeks and did concerts in 11 nations(!). This group was styled by Ria and these outfits in black-white were a great success. Since that year Ria has styled all the European Conti-groups with a total now of over 150 groups = appr.4500 outfits.....and to get something nice for so many for a decent price is every year quite difficult. We all owe Ria a lot for dressing up entire groups.

This first Euro-Conti-group brought us the same very special excitement we remembered from our first encounter with Continentals in 1969/1970. Such a blessing and inspiration was this tour and what a great quality. These Euro-Conti's were adding a whole new dimension to the world of Conti's. Until then the Americans came and are still coming: 4 - 6 groups a year come to Europe; they have appr.20 groups on the road.

This first group in 1986 laid the foundation for a special success.....Soon more auditions came, more requests from churches came. Within 3 years we had 2 Euro-Conti-tours on the road....and kept growing. Today we have 4 summergroups(including one orchestra group and a Francophone group) and we have spring-tours and autumn-tours, so the average is 6 Euro-Conti-tours per year.

In 1990 and 1991 we saw more and more young teenagers in the aisles of the churches singing and doing the choreography of the Continentals while the Continentals performed. The same was happening in the USA. So after debates and study the USA Conti-office and our European office decided to start in 1992 with a YOUNG Continental group, age 13-16 years and of course with real teenage pop-music and a lot of dance and choreography. This turned out to be a tremendous success, so each year we added a Young Conti group to the system, till we had 4 Euro-Young-Contigroups on the road and so it remains every year until now.

In 1996 we added for Spring and Autumn-tours the possibility for other ages. Now it is possible to go on tour till the age of appr.55 years and this also meant a breakthrough.

From 1996 we saw as well more and more CHILDREN in the aisles imitating the choreography of the Young Continentals. For many years you hear them whispering the word 'Conti-Kids' in Continental country, but never did anybody succeed in getting such a group together. This was just waiting till the right moment. Leen and his son Willem were teaching at a seminar in Croatia (1997). When one day sitting on a tree, drinking a good beer, Leen shouted 'Eureka, I have found the solution'!!! Son Willem looked surprised and asked what his dad had found and the answer was: the solution of how to do Continental Kids. So a lot of preparations were done in the next months, that resulted in a number of experiments in 1998. A lot was learned during this time. And that laid the basis for the real first Continental Kids group in 1999. This was an incredible success, and now today there are 9 Continental Kids groups in the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium and Slovakia.....

Another aspect are the opportunities in other nations. Leen has always be searching for leadership in other parts of Europe who could be trained to start in such regions other Continental groups. A whole strategy exists for that and has been succesfull in Italy, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania. It takes a minimum of 3 years to train a person for such a job. It is such a blessing to see now Hungarian Continentals (1 Conti, 1 YC), Slovak Continentals (1 Kids, 1 YC, 1 CS,

1 Encore), Romanian Continentals (2 CS) and Italian Conti's (1 CS). Soon several of those Conti-organisations will start as well the Kids-programms

In 2004 the total is 28 Euro-groups on the road..... doing 450 concerts..... having 150.000 visitors.....making CD's in many languages.... Very impressive, but let the figures not cloud what lies beneath! Conti's attract a lot of people as they do a NEW program each year and have been since the sixties THE global innovators for contemporary christian music (worldwide 75 tours on the road, having reached 15 million visitors, having made over 100 LP/CD productions). But the most important thing is what Leen and Ria experienced during their first encounter with the Continentals so long ago: "It's a life-changing experience". This true for the audience and much more true for the ones who go on tour! It is such a great character-building situation, it will teach so many artistic and social skills, and it is a great spiritual adventure to see God at work.....We all can only be thankful for the gift of Continentals.....

And we should realise that all those Continental groups who travel around Europe are like little armies of ants moving through all the churches of all the nations, making all over contacts, bringing in information, which is very important for the artists networks and the larger goals 'to shape the culture' of the whole organization. And it helps sustaining a solid financial basis. Continental can keep their leading position, as the Continental Art Centre puts in a lot of research, training, professionalism and prayer to do the utmost for the Highest.