

**Oikosnet Europe**  
**Annual Assembly 2018**  
**Crete, 5 to 9 September**



## **Annual Report 2018**

### **Europe with different eyes**

Foreword by the President, Rev. Walter Lüssi

"Democratic Systems of governance are under severe threat, not only from foreign interference and the rise of autocratic regimes, but also from the huge crisis of confidence amongst the electorate. Democracies cannot afford to be complacent if they are to survive and prosper." (Nina Schick, Director of Data and Polling at Rasmussen Global)

According to such researchers it seems that democracy is experiencing globally the worst setback since the 1930ies and that it will continue in free-fall unless we can find ways to reduce inequality and manage the ongoing loss of trust. Rasmussen Global published the outcome of its research under the heading: *"Democracies are losing the hearts and minds of their citizens"*.

Some results of this research:

1. In the eyes of the public, governments around the world are perceived as failing. More than half of the world' inhabitants (51%) thinks that their voice "rarely" or "never" matters in politics, and as much 58% believe that their government doesn't act in their interest.
2. Citizens in democracies don't feel their voice matters: Over half (54%) of citizens living in democracies think their voices "rarely" or "never" matter in politics versus 46% in non-democracies. Of the ten countries that perform the worst on 'political voice', nine are democracies. 74% of citizens share this sentiment in Japan, followed by Poland at 63%, France, Austria and Portugal at 62%, Norway at 61%, and Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium at 60%.

Of course citizens in democratic societies might be inherently more critical of their government than those living in non-democratic societies. But the findings remain relevant and insightful. That concerns Europe in particular. The loss of confidence on the one hand leaves behind a vacuum that has long been actively managed and replenished by other forces. "Fake News", denial of knowledge and achievements, erosion and undermining of

central social and political institutions, the questioning of fundamental human rights are just a few of the key words to be mentioned here.

The Board of Oikosnet Europe in March 2017 issued a public statement on the Future of Europe called *"For a Europe in Conviviality – A Europe of and for the people – Just and Participatory"*. As an European association, we are affected by the mentioned developments and it is our responsibility to contribute to constructive responses through our expertise and together with other civil society actors. If we put the issue of Europe to the forefront, then we want Oikosnet to be more focused on specific themes, more thematic and topic treated over a longer time. In the statement from 2017, the board emphasized: *"Oikosnet Europe is a network that is made up of members across the continent, drawing on the achievements of the European project. They stand ready to engage in the open, transparent and regular dialogue between civil society organisations and the European Institutions as well as to further develop an engaging narrative for Europe and to discuss European policies involving stakeholders from all walks of life, thus fostering conviviality and the European project."*

Many of our members deal already with the European question. At the end I just want to mention one project that touched me a lot: "Netzteufel – Wo Hass im Netz vorkommt" ([www.netzteufel.eaberlin.de/](http://www.netzteufel.eaberlin.de/)), a project of the Protestant Academy Berlin about "Hate Speeches" on Social Media. A total of five main narratives on the topics of Islam, homosexuality, escape, gender and democracy, which poison the communication in the net, were identified. *"The toxic narratives reveal deeply rooted misanthropic attitudes and discriminatory positions in the name of the Christian faith,"* says Timo Verseemann. *"They must be points of contact for the Church, Christians, to counter the hatred and to strengthen a digital democratic culture on the Net"*, says Verseemann, together with his colleague Kristina Herbst responsible for the project.

Let us deal with the European issue. Let us connect the different perspectives and initiatives. We are pursuing the following objectives that we can discuss at our annual meeting in Greece: to strengthen the European dimension; qualification and profiling of members on the topic of Europe; contribute to the networking of members among each other and with other social actors; from own expertise contribute to current discourses and initiate discourses together with other actors.

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## **Activities of the Management Board**

Board meetings between the Annual Conferences have taken place as follows

### 2017-11-24 Oikosnet Board (Tutzing)

Main items for board deliberations:

- Evaluation of the Annual Conference in Flehingen
- Initial planning of next Annual Conference
- The future of the Gender and Justice Network

- Definition of OE Priorities
- Structure for the work of the new board

#### 2018-02-07 Oikosnet Board (Skype)

Main items for board deliberations:

- Inventory of ongoing and future projects
- Preparation of the Annual Conference in Crete
- Date (in the year) of Future Annual Conferences
- Oikosnet Europe – What do we stand for
- Diversity and Inclusion – Mission Statement

#### 2018-03-19 Oikosnet Board (Strasbourg)

Main items for board deliberations:

- Dissolution of the German Association
- Meeting with Christian Albecker, President of the Protestant Churches of Alsace and Lorraine, and Esther Lenz, Church Inspector

#### 2018-06-15 Oikosnet Board (Skype)

Main items for board deliberations:

- More detailed preparations of the Annual Conference in Crete
- Budget-related items
- Reports and future activities

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## **Activities of the President**

As mentioned (see Board meeting in Strasbourg) the Board met with the President and the Church Inspector of the Protestant Churches of Alsace and Lorraine. Unfortunately it was not possible as it was intended to also meet representatives from Liebfrauenberg.

Direct contacts, official or informal, are important to me and that's why I like to use the opportunity of Board meetings to deepen contacts or make new contacts. Already at the meeting in Tutzing last November we had a short contact with the Deputy Director of the Academy, Judith Stumptner, study leader for art, culture, education, digital, social media.

As new elected President I had a lot of correspondence and contacts with people which are already involved or interested in our network. I'm thankful for all this activities which are not seen on the big screen but are an unbroken sign of life and an expression of the will to take responsibility across many borders. Thanks to all who have contributed in this way!

#### Visit to the German Academies (EAD)

Above this I made a special visit to the German Academies (EAD) on January 29, 2018 in Berlin and had a good conversation with Rüdiger Sachau, President, Klaus Hotz, General Secretary, and Rüdiger Noll, Head of Europe and Ecumenism. In the conversation many expectations were raised with regard to Oikosnet Europe. Here is just one idea mentioned, which could be interesting for other members and which other members needs for their implementation: In Switzerland, we call it "Seitenwechsel". It means the exchange of staff members to give them new insights and expand their own horizons.

### Meeting of the Arab-European Dialogue

From 1 to 4 May 2018 I accepted the invitation and attended the Meeting of the Arab-European Dialogue in Sigtuna, Sweden (see below "Further development of projects"). I was impressed by the diversity of people who came together, including high-ranking people, for example from Sweden and Egypt. The main focus of the discussion was about the role of the media and religion in the society. For me, it was equally important to observe that this dialogue has become sustainable and that over several decades much understanding for the different contexts had been developed and that it has become a learning process for the coexistence of cultures and religions. On behalf of the Board of Oikosnet Europe, I was asked to give some greeting words.

### General Assembly of the Conference of European Churches

In the Board we decided to strengthen the connection to partner organizations and make it more binding. With this goal I travelled to Novi Sad, Serbia, where the General Assembly of the Conference of European Churches was held from 31 May to 6 June 2018. The Assembly gathered under the theme "You Shall Be My Witnesses" (Acts 1:8). The range of different church traditions is enormous. The conversation about a common witness in Europe was therefore always difficult. Progress is barely visible. And yet, just the fact that these different traditions are in contact with each other and that representatives are gathering was an encouraging sign to me.

The General Assembly also allowed many informal contacts, including possible other partner organizations. I took the opportunity for greeting words and in my speech I pointed out that Oikosnet Europe, as a partner organization, is ready to work together to strengthen civil society, bear witness and work for democratic structures: *"... I focussed on this issue because I can see these days how eager the member churches of CEC deal with the problems of our time and how seriously you as delegates are engaged with the future of the Christian faith on the continent and with the spiritual progress of the peoples of Europe.*

*Please take also advantage of our expertise. Make use of it. Find ways and forms how we can be a more active and substantial part of your own process. As different as the centres and academies of Oikosnet Europe might be today, they are all joined in their belief that as a faith based organisation there is a need to act out responsibility for society and living together peacefully and that real and deep exchanges and education in different ways is important to achieve this."*

There is a video version of the message of the CEC General Assembly, which can be viewed over following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DQ1rq7nUEjE&t=5s>.

## 60 years and pretty wise

I don't speak about Oikosnet Europe. Oikosnet becomes 63 this year. But I want to congratulate Rüdiger Noll, our Executive Secretary, also in this way at the occasion of his sixtieth birthday. I had the pleasure to celebrate this birthday with him. And I was impressed by the many international guests who had come to his party. Of course, this can not simply be claimed for Oikosnet. Rüdiger has been and still is part in many networks. However, I have seen many familiar faces, which shows to me that a network of institutions and a network of fellows are not opposite concepts, but can greatly enrich each other.

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## **Activities of the Executive Secretary**

Since the establishment of the new structures of Oikosnet Europe (the Secretariat and the new Board), the responsibilities of the Executive Secretary have considerably changed. Responsibilities which were previously exclusively assigned to the Executive Secretary are now taken up collectively, including the President, Board members and the Secretariat. For instance, all Board members were now involved in planning the Annual Conference in Crete. Oikosnet members and friends anyhow make their own choice as to whom to approach within the Oikosnet structures despite of the issue or request.

During the period covered by this report, it remained, however, the task of the Executive Secretary to establish, in consultation with the President, the agendas for Board meetings and the Business sessions of the Annual Conference. But documents were prepared and circulated by several persons, not always by the Executive Secretary. In Board meetings, the Executive Secretary serves in an advisory capacity, not seldom as the “historic memory”, but also presenting idea for activities and initiatives deriving quite often from his involvement in European discourses.

In order to structure the internal cooperation and communication of the different Oikosnet points of entry, the President and the Executive Secretary met for a day-meeting in Berlin in January 2018. This also included a meeting with the President and the General Secretary of the German association of Protestant Academies (EAD). Maintaining relations with the German members of Oikosnet Europe through EAD and encouraging them to participate in OE activities is also one of the main tasks of the Executive Secretary. At each Board meeting and at every Assembly of EAD there is a report about European activities and about Oikosnet Europe on the agenda.

Relations with Oikosnet members and potential members with regard to supporting them and to engage in common activities is anyhow one of the tasks assumed by the Executive Secretary. During the last year, the Executive Secretary used an invitation by the European Union and the European Peoples' Party (EPP) to also visit the Academy of Suprasl in Poland. Amazed by Suprasl's hospitality, its activities and its visible and hidden potential, the idea arouse, weather it would not be wise to introduce one or two Oikosnet members more

substantially at Annual Conferences. That would probably open space for generating new ideas and co-operations in a context of mutual sharing.

Through past and present activities and connections in the European institutional and ecumenical world, the Executive Secretary is quite often invited to give presentations on European issues in church fora as well as in the political realm. These often provide useful occasions to speak about developments in Oikosnet Europe and/or to approach potential new Oikosnet members. As examples of the last year, presentations at the EU's Civil Society Dialogue in Poland or a presentation at the meeting of European Orders and Communities (E.I.I.R) can be mentioned. At other occasions, side discussions about a future membership in Oikosnet Europe took place, for instance, with the Moderator of the Church of Scotland and Metropolitan Ambrosius from Finland, who is also the Director of the St Sophia Center in Helsinki.

Recent years, saw the dissolution of Oikosnet International as a formal structure. Ties with other regional Oikosnet structures (perhaps with the exception of Africa) have weakened, if they are still at all existent. On the other hand, individual academies from other continents show interest in cooperating with European partners. The Executive Secretary held talks with the Director of an Academy from Lome (Togo), which is very much modelled according to the German raw model. The Academy is seeking reliable partners in Europe, including individual Academies and Oikosnet Europe. Rüdiger Sachau, Director of the Protestant Academy in Berlin together with the Executive Secretary held talks with the Director of a Korean Christian Academy, which is engaged in supporting the Korean re-unification process by learning from German and European experiences. From the European side, we emphasized that the German re-unification was to be seen in a regional (European) context and that there was expertise to be found from several countries within Oikosnet Europe when it comes to re-conciliation processes. The experience and expertise of the Corrymeela center and community was mentioned in particular.

### Project-Related Activities

See "Further development of projects: Civil Society Project".

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## **Activities of board members**

Sören Lenz: Since January I'm Executive Secretary of CEC and responsible for the Office in Strasbourg. After eight years at the Liebfrauenberg it was time for a change. But however, as I've soon discovered in my new job, the Work of CEC and Oikosnet is very much linked. It was very important that Oikosnet was present at the General Assembly of CEC which underlines the attention Oikosnet pays to European ecumenical work. One of the most urgent issues on a European level are populism, migration and the future of Europe. Together we should foster open discourses among our members and Churches in Europe. Europe needs us to become a different Europe, a Europe of solidarity and fairness.

I think our both organisations are rich because of their diversity and expertise. Therefore I'd like to emphasize in my future mission our common background and I try to work on even more cooperation between CEC and Oikosnet Europe.

Julia Gerlach: In September 2017, I was elected member to the Oikosnet Europe Board at the Annual Conference in Flehingen, Germany. Being both new to Oikosnet Europe and to the Board, my focus during the first year has been on getting involved and contributing to the network with regards to my specific back-ground, experiences, and skills.

Conceptualizing a network's identity as an ongoing and emancipatory process, I have been involved in this manner by drafting the Vision, Mission, and Values Statement and the Diversity and Inclusion Statement that will serve as the basis for discussion at the Annual Meeting in Crete in September 2018.

With regards to the quality of Oikosnet Europe as a platform and network, I have had the pleasure to both promote this idea and make use of it. I was invited to the Annual Conference of the Norwegian Churchacademies (Norske Kirkeakademier) on "Church and Art" in Gran, Norway, in March 2018, in order to introduce Oikosnet Europe and get insights into how academies engage in and inspire the Norwegian society. Contacts through Oikosnet Europe have informed my work at the Meissen Protestant Academy (Evangelische Akademie Meissen). In the framework of a seminar on "1968" in January 2018, the European perspective was strengthened by a talk by Jiří Silný, formerly Ecumenical Academy Prague (Ekumenická akademie). For September 2019, a study trip from Meissen, Germany, to Zurich, Switzerland, is in the process of planning. It is dedicated to the 500th anniversary of the reformation in Zurich and the ecumenical dialogue. The organization is shared between Heiko Franke (Pastoralkolleg Meissen) and me, and kindly supported by Walter Lüssi (Evangelisch-reformierte Landeskirche des Kantons Zürich/Oikosnet Europe).

As for joint projects that Oikosnet Europe members organize together, I have had the pleasure to participate in a meeting for the preparation of the Civil Society Project for Central Europe initiated by Rüdiger Noll (Evangelische Akademien in Deutschland/Oikosnet Europe) and Klaus-Dieter Kaiser (Evangelische Akademie der Nordkirche) in Berlin in April 2018.

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## **Activities of the secretariat**

### The newsletter of Oikosnet Europe

The newsletters of Oikosnet Europe is the main tool for communication with members and partners. Today it reaches out to 159 subscribers and is in general read by approximately 33 %. During 2017 the newsletter was published at four occasions, February 23, March 22, July 10 and December 12. During 2018 the newsletter has, so far, been published three times, February 2, April 27 and May 18.

Contributions to the Newsletter is mainly given by members of the board and the secretariat. Recurrent information is an editorial written by the President Walter Lüssi or the Executive Secretary Rüdiger Noll. The newsletter also gives updates from the Board meetings and information on the Annual Conferences. Common projects like the DPC training in Ghana, the project on Civil Society and Democracy in Central Europe, the Arab Europe Citizens Dialogue Conference in Sigtuna etc. has also been communicated through the newsletter.

All members of the organisation are welcome to contribute with content on upcoming events, conferences and projects and are also encouraged to do so. The Orthodox Academy of Crete, for instance, took this opportunity sharing information on their seminars in Iconography.

### New privacy policy for Oikosnet Europe

Due to the new Data Protection Act, General Data Protection Regulation (European Parliament and Council Regulation (EC) no 2016/679, GDPR), Oikosnet Europe has implemented a new privacy policy on how to handle personal data. The new policy means, inter alia, that you will be asked to accept the privacy policy of OE when you register to events or conferences on-line. It also means that participants to our events can request for all the personal data OE have registered. The information about the new policy was sent out to all members and subscribers of the newsletter in May. The privacy policy is published on the website of Oikosnet Europe and all requests according to the new regulation onwards will be dealt with by the secretariat of Oikosnet Europe.

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## **Further development of projects**

### The Arab-Europe Citizens Dialogue in Sigtuna, Sweden

In May 1 – 4, the Sigtuna Foundation, the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services (CEOSS), Oikosnet Europe and Church of Sweden arranged the Arab-Europe Citizens Dialogue in Sigtuna, Sweden. The general scope of the conference was the relation between media and society with a specific focus on gender and media perspectives.

The participants represented Politics, faith-based Organisations and Civil Society Institutions from both the Arab and European region and among the speakers were for instance Azza Karam, PhD, Senior Advisor, UN Population Fund (UNFPA), and Coordinator, UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Religion and Development, Egypt/USA; Anders Wejryd, President for Europe World Council of Churches, Archbishop, Andrea Zaki, PhD, President, Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services (CEOSS), Egypt; Karin Wiborn, General Secretary, Christian Council of Sweden, Walter Lüssi, President, Oikosnet Europe, Rüdiger Noll, Executive Secretary, Oikosnet Europe, Germany, Usamah Al Abed, PhD, Prof., President of the



Religious Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives, Former President of Al-Azhar Univ., Egypt, Alf Linderman, PhD, Executive Director, Assoc. Prof. Uppsala Univ., Sweden  
Mohamed Alorabi, Ambassador, Former Foreign Minister, Egypt, Mia Lövheim, PhD, Prof. Sociology of Religion, Uppsala Univ., Sweden.

The Arab – Europe Citizens Dialogue 2018 had all together 60 participants and was the 6th consultation since 2010.

### Dialogue for Peaceful Change

The conflict-management method Dialogue for Peaceful Change (DPC) is one of the fruits of the global Oikosnet-network. Started in 2004, it has now reached over 1.200 persons (majority women) which followed the 5 day-training course. Between the AC-2017 and the AC-2018 of Oikosnet Europe, four trainings were organised: an ‘only for women-training’ in Abokobi, Ghana, with 23 participants, two trainings in Corrymeela, Northern Ireland with in total 30 participants, and finally a training in Antioch (California, USA) where 9 participants (all women) showed up. In Antioch the DPC-program is part of the policy-plan of the municipality and available for all volunteers, which are active engaging in the reduction of youth and gang violence.

At the moment a Training of Trainers (ToT) is planned in March 2019 in No. Ireland. This will be combined with a ‘normal’ training. The timing is an issue at the moment: is it wise to have a training and a Training of Trainers with people from all over the world in the weekend that the Brexit is planned to be executed? In any case we also want to use the opportunity to update all our hand-outs, to start an updated website with some online materials as well as to discuss new insights with our experienced trainers during that meeting.

### Civil Society Project

In December 2016, at its meeting in Budapest, the Board decided to engage, together with the EAD and the Protestant Academy of Rostock, in a project on “Strengthening Democracy and Civil Society in Central Europe”. The project coordinator and fundraiser for Oikosnet Europe and the EAD is the Executive Secretary. Project partners in central Europe have been identified and a first stakeholder meeting took place in Berlin in April 2018, which resulted, inter alia, in a re-drafted project description and potential arrangements. The fundraising efforts, for the time being, concentrate on the German Foreign Ministry, which showed an interest in and envisaged support for the project. In the meantime, three pilot-projects have been already agreed with the Foreign Ministry on themes such as “European and National Narratives and the role of religion within them”, “European energy transition” and “Civil Society’s Reaction to Populism in Europe”. These involve also partners of the long-term project. At the time that this report is written, the funding of the long-term project (implementation 2019/20), is still to be ensured.

The new Swiss member of Oikosnet Europe (Plusbildung) showed an interest in organizing a pre-consultation of the project in order to introduce and to involve the Swiss perspective on civil society and in order to sharpen the fundamental questions of the project.

Finally, the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, announced a Summit of the European Heads of State and Governments on the Future of Europe to take place in Sibiu in April 2019. Discussions are under way with the former Oikosnet member, the Protestant Academy of Hermannstadt, to organize a European pre-meeting in order to make the churches and the academy's voice heard and introduced into the process.

"Europe" is in a crisis and it is evident that the European integration project is in an existential crisis. The democratic deficit as well as the decreasing participation of the people and the citizens are main issues of the crisis. It might well be that the forthcoming European elections will strengthen populist parties to the extent that the future European Parliament will not be able to act on major issues ahead. The Oikosnet project, therefore, comes at the right time. At the forthcoming Annual Assembly our understanding of civil society and the role of the churches within it as well as the features of the project are to be discussed further. Also the Arab-European Dialogue, in which Oikosnet Europe is engaged, puts an emphasis on civil society engagement. What are the changes and mechanisms of civil society actors to make a difference? What could be the contribution of churches and church-related academies? How do we want to engage with Europe at times, at which the European Institutions and policies need substantial reforms and at which national and anti-European, populist, forces put the integration process at risk?

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## **Dissolution of Oikosnet Europe According to German Law**

The Annual Conference in Flehingen, Germany, had elected Hermann Dühringer and Günter Renz as Dissoluters. Hermann Düringer has handed in all relevant documents to the respective authorities (Amtsgericht Ulm). The latest document were the accounts 2017.

These documents are now scrutinized by the Amtsgericht Ulm. At the same time, the dissolution request was published in the Amtsblatt. If no claims against Oikosnet Europe are made, the dissolution can be processed in a year's time after the publication.

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## **Membership development**

One and a half month before the 2018 Annual Conference, the list of Oikosnet members provided by the Secretariat contains 37 members from 17 countries, out of which 15 members are German Academies. The Orthodox Academy of Volos, which recently informed the Board orally about their withdrawal, had already been dropped from this list. In the meantime, the Protestant Academy Haus am Schüberg from Germany announced its withdrawal and the Italian "Casa Cares" asked for time for decisions to be taken by its Board as to whether it still regard itself to be a member of Oikosnet Europe. After the departure of Antoinette and Paul Krieg as Directors, the center was re-established as a diaconical center.

After “Plusbildung – ökumenische Bildungslandschaft Schweiz” joining Oikosnet Europe last year, it still remains to be seen, whether individual Swiss centers (Tecum and EREN) remain members in their own right. After Sören Lenz left Le Liebfrauenberg/France (the Annual Conference in Crete will be his last as a member of Oikosnet), it is not clear as to what the future of le Liebfrauenberg will be. The Oikosnet Board, therefore, deliberately took the decision of meeting in Strasbourg (March 2018) in order to meet with the church leadership and to discuss the future of the center.

In summary: at best, Oikosnet now has 36 members from 17 European countries. Just for comparison: at the time, when the decision was taken to transform Oikosnet into an association according to Swedish law (i.e. at the Annual Conference in Prague, 2016), Oikosnet had 42 members from 19 countries.

But there are also positive news: The Annual Assembly in Crete will have to decide on the membership of the Monzlo Conference Center from Hungary, which applied for membership after the Board met with potential member centers in Hungary and after the center being involved in the civil society project. Several members (e.g. Lux Mundi/Spain) and former members (e.g. Protestant Study center Köszeg/Hungary) have approached Oikosnet again with the view to become more active in Oikosnet again. In addition, new centers have asked about deeper relations with Oikosnet. Almost all present Oikosnet members do pay their membership fee and seem to become more active within the network. Is this a reversal of a trend?

The actual membership base, however, remains a challenge for a network which aims at engaging members from different parts of Europe in mutual exchange and learning processes and which wants to address European issues of common concern. Even Oikosnet Europe as a platform depends on different perspectives (regional, cultural, confessional ...) being brought together in order to make a difference.

This is why the Board already back in 2013 took several initiatives to increase the membership again. The Board discussed lists of potential members of different kind and individual Board members agreed to establish a relation with these potential candidates. In early 2016, Sören Lenz had invited potential members from central and eastern Europe in order to discuss with them their needs and their views on Europe. None of these initiatives led to concrete results in membership up until now.

That leads to the question as to what is needed to make Oikosnet attractive and relevant for (potential) members. In recent years, Oikosnet has experienced that a membership should not just be based on individual people. In several cases, members left Oikosnet when there was a change of staff. Secondly, Oikosnet should be clear on what it has to offer to its members. A certain indication seems to be, that potential members are interested to join, if they are engaged in common activities and projects with other academies. In this regard, it is good that the Annual Assembly will review again the *raison d’être*, the vision and the mission of Oikosnet Europe. The discussion, already raised in 2016, as to which kind of members should be invited to join (membership criteria), also needs to continue. In terms of an inviting character and its visibility, of course, communication policy and practice also play a role.

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August 15, 2018/WL