

EKHN International Partnership Consultation 2025

Seeking Unity

Partnerships in a Changing and Challenging World

Joint Statement

The **Fourth International Partnership Consultation** was held from 27th till 30th of January 2025 in Arnoldshain after the official installing of Prof. Dr Christiane Tietz as Church President of EKHN. The theme of the Consultation was: “Seeking Unity – Partnership in a changing and challenging World”.

Representatives from the following partner churches and partnership committees in the EKHN, as well as one associated institution, were present:

- **Church of North India (CNI)**
Amritsar Diocese – Partnership Committee of the Deanery of Wetterau.
- **Church of South India (CSI)**
East Kerala Diocese – Partnership Committee of the Deaneries of Büdinger Land and Vogelsberg;
Krishna Godavari Diocese – Partnership Committee of the Deanery of Gießener Land.
Unfortunately, the invited delegates couldn't participate because of rejected visa through the German Embassy.
- **Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren (EKBB)**
Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau.
- **Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania - Karagwe Diocese (ELCT-KAD)**
District Mabira – Partnership Committee of the Deanery of Nassauer Land;
Districts Ngara and Kituntu – Partnership Committee of the Deanery of Biedenkopf-Gladenbach.
- **Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania - North Western Diocese (ELCT-NWD)**
Ruhija Evangelical Academy – Partnership Committee of the Deanery an der Dill.
- **Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Poland (EAKwP)**
Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau.
- **Evangelical Reformed Church in the Republic of Poland (ERKwP)**
Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau.
- **Gereja Kristen Protestan Simalungun (GKPS)**
Partnership Committee of the Deaneries of Westerwald and an der Dill.
- **Gereja Masehi Injili di Minahasa (GMIM)**
Partnership Committee of the Church District Rheinhessen and Nassauer Land.
- **Henry Martin Institute, Hyderabad, India**
- **Moravian Church in Tanzania - Southern Province (MCTSP)**

- **Moravian Church in South Africa (MCSA)**
District Capetown South – Partnership Committee of the Deanery of Darmstadt;
District Algoa-Tsitsikamma – Partnership Committee of the Deanery of Vorderer Odenwald.
- **Polish Ecumenical Council (PÖR)**
Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau.
- **Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK)**
Presbytery Gwangju – Partnership Committee of the Deaneries of Dreieich-Rodgau and Groß-Gerau-Rüsselsheim.
- **Presbyterian Church of Ghana (PCG)**
Asante Presbytery – Kumasi – Partnership Committee of the Deanery of an der Lahn;
Northern Presbytery – Partnership Committee of the Deanery of the cities of Frankfurt and Offenbach.
- **United Church of Christ USA (UCC)**
New York Conference – Partnership Committee of the Deaneries of Frankfurt and Offenbach and Wiesbaden.
- **Waldensian Church Italy**
Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau.

Preface

The world is divided and wounded by war, injustice and inequality. While churches worldwide are striving for unity, they are divided on moral and ethical issues. The pain of division has the potential to divide humanity even more.

The world needs examples of seeking, celebrating, living unity as a witness to Creation. Our initiatives of reconciliation, partnerships and church fellowships are fragments of unity. Yet they are testimonies and refer to the promised unity with God. We understand our partnership relations as a commitment to peace, reconciliation and mutual understanding.

In this context, let us first **remember where we come from**. Since the decisions in EKHN to establish direct partnership relations with churches in Africa, America, Asia and Europe, there have been deep relations growing on the institutional level as well as on personal level. From the beginning the direct partner relations were built on both sides on the level of congregations, parishes, deaneries, church districts, presbyteries, institutions and youth. During the last years, the relations on the level of Church Boards could also be developed. Despite all personnel changes and other challenges, our relationships are still important for the ecumenical witness of our churches, and we should retain them for the future.

We remember the **First International Partnership Consultation** held in Frankfurt with partners from Africa and Asia in September 2004 and with partners from Europe in February 2006 in the context of evaluating of 20 years and more of common partnership relations. In

our final statement we confirmed that “the vibrancy of our relationships and new suggestions are coming out of partnership visits and personal exchange programs, projects and seminars on themes of common concern and celebration of Partnership Sundays.” With regard to relations within Europe, it was stated: “We see our partnerships as a process of reconciliation, of listening to each other and of struggling to find a common Protestant voice in the European context.”

The **Second International Partnership Consultation** with partners from Africa, Asia, Europe and the USA was held in February 2009 in Arnoldshain on the occasion of the installing of Rev. Dr Volker Jung as Church President of EKHN. The theme was “‘Blessed are the peacemakers!’ – The contribution of our churches towards the growth of peace.” We agreed that peace in its holistic understanding (Shalom) is a gift of God to all human beings, that those who want to have peace have to work for peace and that peace is only lasting if it is connected with law, justice and the integrity of Creation. We committed ourselves to work for that through our partnership relations.

Eight years later, in August 2017, we again came together to meet as partners for the **Third International Partnership Consultation** in Arnoldshain on the occasion of 500 years of the Reformation of Martin Luther: “Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise – Do our partnerships need continuous reformation?” Finally, we agreed: “For us, the ecumenical partner relationships widen our horizon! So we commit ourselves to make the implications of this visible in the day to day life of our churches. We all are sisters and brothers in Christ and members of a united mission in solidarity! As representatives of different churches in Africa, Asia, Europe and North America, we will encourage our churches to become part of this fellowship in the body of Christ, to continue our exchanges on faith issues, to respond to global concerns through open forums and to participate in the pilgrimage for justice and peace.”

During the **Corona pandemic**, we have experienced what it means when we can't visit each other and work on issues together. We have learned how important mutual visits are for the liveliness of our partner relationships. During this time, we also discovered new forms of communication through video conferences and digital services like “Meet and Pray”, which we want to continue to develop and expand.

The **Fourth International Partnership Consultation** took place in January 2025, the beginning of the year of celebrating the anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. It reminds us of the early attempts and disputes in Christianity in the effort to find unity. The Nicene Council itself was based on a theological debate and ultimately led to both – unity and division.

The Consultation in January 2025 examined theological concepts of unity, considered these in the light of the Nicaea anniversary and asked about their significance for churches and societies in the global partnership contexts today and in the future. We explored questions of division in societies, searched for methods and ways of understanding theological and moral dissent and committed ourselves to the theology of Creation.

We worked together on the following topics: Unity as a Promise and Hope – Church and Ethical Convictions – Church and Democracy – Church and Creation.

The Consultation was held in the presence of Church President Prof. Dr Christiane Tietz, and her deputy Rev. Ulrike Scherf together with representatives of the Church Board, the Church Administration, the Ecumenical Centre of EKHN and EKKW, and members of the different partnership committees. After thorough deliberations and careful consideration, the following observations and recommendations were made.

Unity as a Promise and Hope

The call of Jesus Christ to unity is both a mandate and a promise. Unity in faith is not formed through personal achievements, but through the belief that we participate together in the Trinitarian God: in God the Creator, who is our foundation; in God's son, Jesus Christ, who was martyred by deadly powers but was raised to the fullness of life as hope for all humankind; and in God's Spirit who brings us together. This is the core of our hope.

We affirm that fundamental tasks of ecumenical work are to reflect, relate, live diversity, seek unity and communion within Christianity (Ephesians 4:1-6). Differences are encouraged to be discussed. Different forms and shapes of church have legitimate validity. The question of what can be recognized as legitimate diversity is not only a theological one, but also one of church politics, social and civic norms. Reflecting on the Council of Nicaea has encouraged us to understand the suspenseful unity of the Trinity as a promise and hope and to understand oneself as part of the diversity of the global churches.

As partner churches we affirm:

- our understanding of unity as communion, and not uniformity,
- our belief that unity is both a promise and a mandate,
- our understanding of ourselves and our partner churches as one in Christ,
- that we are part of God's given unity, therefore we seek for visible unity,
- that we encounter tensions yet remain full of hope and in the light of God's promise,
- that in prayer we share the tensions under which our partnerships and partner churches suffer,
- that because and in spite of these points we remain together on the path towards unity.

Church and Ethical Convictions

We acknowledge that there are differences between our churches in ethical discernments and theological assessments of human and societal issues, which are often a source of misunderstandings and discontent. In the midst of all this, we are called to unity.

Notwithstanding the difference in our churches' stance on challenging theological and ethical issues, we agree that change has always happened in our churches and still in our time as well. Changes in theology, understanding of Holy Scripture and church dogmatics are occurring in churches in different ways. Changes are shaped in interdependence with norms, theological

scientific insights, influences of the prevailing societies, new scientific developments, leadership structures, demographics, and more.

As partner churches strive for an understanding of each other's processes of change, we

- accompany one another in our journeys with our prayers and loyalty,
- remain open to listening to one another, withhold our judgement, and encourage mutual solidarity (Romans 14:10+13),
- recognize that there are issues in which we currently disagree, be it of theological or cultural origin, but we remain in rational and purposeful discussions about these issues,
- mutual recognition that all churches strive to remain faithful to the gospel,
- encourage meaningful conversations on these issues in secure and braver spaces,
- know that what binds us together as Christians in this world is stronger than singular issues that we might currently disagree on,
- are reminded of our responsibility as Christians to deal with one another in the spirit of mutual respect, peace and love (Romans 12:9-21).

To keep conversations on controversial subjects open, we keep using tools like the "Moral Discernment" tool by the World Council of Churches (WCC), which was introduced at the Consultation, as well as guidelines by the mission societies and international church federations.

Church and Democracy

All our churches come from countries that perceive themselves as democracies. However, in many of our home countries, democracy is threatened by nationalist, populist, fascist or extremist parties and groups.

We acknowledge our churches exist in varying social and political contexts. Some churches are aligned with governments and/or political parties, some however are under pressure by majority political and/or religious groups. We affirm that democracy is the political form which benefits society most through:

- its possible participation of all people,
- equality of all before the law,
- support of the weak and human dignity for all,
- balance of the interests of all,
- freedom of speech and religion.

These align with Christian principles.

In this form of society, power comes from the people. There should not be any group or individual, that takes power and rights away from sections of society. In the equality of all people, surpassing limits of economic status, gender, religious background (Galatians 3:28), the Kingdom of God can be perceptible.

Whatever our place in society is, we as partner churches pledge to be advocates of a healthy democracy. We do this by:

- actions in solidarity and in prayer,
- human rights advocacy, especially where needed most,
- committing to interfaith and ecumenical dialogue and actions,
- providing secure and braver spaces for discourse,
- empowering people to speak out, and making heard those whose voices are silenced,
- fighting misinformation.

As churches we want to stand up for those who are persecuted in our societies, for the weak, and the marginalized. We are involved in works of reconciliation, peace and justice for all, for by our actions we are blessed. (Matthew 5:3-10).

Church and Creation

As Christians we know human life is part of God's Creation and we are one with nature, inevitably connected with the state of our natural environment. In the light of God's task to cultivate and preserve the earth (Genesis 1:28) we have a responsibility to correct the wrongs we did to nature and reconcile with her, as nature is necessary for our survival. We as God's children around the globe face and mutually share obvious ecological challenges. Protecting the environment is not only an ethical question of taking care of Creation, but also a matter of preserving the earth for generations to come. Climate change worldwide is the most threatening issue to respond to through the following steps:

- awareness building within our communities,
- implementing sustainable projects to save the climate,
- seriously changing our habits, for example regarding our use of mobility, our consumption of food and goods,
- developing more and regular ways of digital meetings and communication by social media to avoid flights and other climate harming emissions,
- exchanging knowledge, expertise and technologies, sharing best practice examples,
- saving special resources in our annual budgets for climate friendly actions, campaigns and programs,
- giving witness of the effects of climate change to those who are less affected by it,
- giving hope to, stand in solidarity with and support all parts of Creation that are already visibly affected by climate change.

These efforts require worldwide advocacy, as well as making aware that short term economical and consumerist considerations will hinder environmental protection efforts, and that ecology and thriving economies are intertwined in the long term.

Because we are part of God's Creation, churches should be role models for others in implementing climate friendly regulations. Therefore, churches should more fully engage with existing climate and sustainability efforts in their communities (Romans 8:19-21).

We acknowledge that the response from churches could vary depending on their ecological impact, and the circumstances they are dwelling in. However, the Christian church is a strong power in terms of numbers and solidarity, as well as in terms of influence, respect and relevance. That is why we should make use of our power to show that a climate friendly and earth preserving lifestyle is possible and highly needed.

Our Commitments

During our consultation we – the representatives of the participating churches, and as part of the world-wide ecumenical movement – experienced our unity in faith by confessing the Nicene Creed together. We confirm that we are united as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12+26). We are united in our efforts to continue our work for justice, peace, reconciliation and the integrity of Creation. We agreed:

- that we are one with Creation and therefore share our efforts for the integrity of Creation,
- to practice solidarity with one another,
- to respect our different cultural backgrounds and theological convictions,
- to create spaces where we can talk openly and respectfully about that which divides us,
- to pray together and for one another,
- to be concerned for one another as partner churches,
- to foster the exchange of church professionals and volunteers,
- to continue mutual visits but also commit to use more environmentally friendly technologies for communication and outreach,
- to reflect upon our shared history of colonialism and to overcome its impacts,
- to strengthen our relations and be open to multilateral partnerships,
- to find ways to include young people in our partnerships by making their voices heard on all levels of our partnership relations, by fostering youth exchange programs, by encouraging the participation of both laypeople and clergy in a mix of generations, and by raising awareness about the international partnerships among youth in all churches,
- to find ways for regular online worshipping as communion of partner churches.

We understand our relations not only as a partnership, but also as a companionship (“Weggemeinschaft”) to create signs of God’s Kingdom amidst this diverse world: Walking together, despite tensions because of differing convictions, and trusting in God’s guidance to lead us towards greater understanding and faithfulness.

We agree on the diversity of the worldwide Christian Fellowship, and that staying together is sometimes a challenge. We are convinced that we as individual churches only ever perceive a small part of the mosaic of what is God's will in this world. Only in a future unity of the Christian community, God's will becomes fully apparent. **“That they all may be one!”** This phrase derived from a verse in the “Farewell Discourse” in the Gospel of John (17:21) is still the leading hope in our international fellowship!

“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”
(Ephesians 4:3-6)

Arnoldshain, 30th of January 2025

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