



Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,
I send you greetings from the Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau (EKHN) and wish you a blessed Pentecost.

At the end of May a new parliament will be elected in the European Union, and it is expected that right-wing conservative and populist parties will have greater representation in the future. The strengthening of right-wing populist forces in Germany and Europe also poses new challenges for the work of the Church. For many years now we have enjoyed close partnership relations with your Churches in Africa, Asia, Europe and the US. In our meetings and within our cooperations we experience cultural, denominational and religious diversity as strengthening factors, and in Europe they also serve as a guarantor for decades of peace.

In this Newsletter you will find some examples how the EKHN is trying to deal with these challenges and develop a culture of tolerance and respect while remaining impartial in an open-minded Church.

I wish you an enjoyable read.
May God's Spirit strengthen our ecumenical fellowship.

Yours in Christ,

Rev. Detlev Knoche



Vision to Become a Church of Just Peace

God wants there to be peace on Earth. Peace – that means more than the absence of war or violence. Peace, biblically “shalom”, is always connected with the hope for a just world. Shalom stands for the great prospect that one day all peoples will be able to live well and peace will be given to all of creation. This thought is also expressed in the 2019 annual watchword of the Moravian Church: “Seek peace and pursue it” (Psalm 34:15). This also motivated the EKHN Synod, during its autumn 2018 meeting, to give a prominent position to the theme of peace exactly 100 years following the end of World War I and in times of increasing armed conflict in many parts of the world. In the course of this year the Synod wants not only to present a statement on the topic of peace, but also to give impulses on how peace-building actions can be strengthened in all areas of the Church. Cornerstones for this include a stronger advocacy for civil conflict solutions, a resolute opposition to arms exports in crisis regions, a greater commitment to banning autonomous weapons systems and a debate on the topic of cyber war. (dk)

News Items

On the first Sunday in Advent in 2018, the new “Order of Worship Texts and Songs” took effect in the member churches of the Protestant Church in Germany. It regulates which Bible texts are read during worship on a certain Sunday or feast day, and which texts are the basis of the sermon. The new order incorporates more Old Testament texts than its predecessor did, and it offers a greater variety of biblical books and themes. (dk)

In 2019, the Reformed and the Lutherans will commemorate the Swiss Protestant theologian and “Church Father” of the 20th century with a Karl Barth Year. Karl Barth published his first theological work in 1919, an interpretation of the Epistle to the Romans in the New Testament. The book marked the beginning of a new epoch in Protestant theology. Later Barth opposed National Socialism and belonged to the leadership council of the “Confessing Church”. (dk)

The Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau and the Diocese of Limburg will host the third ecumenical Church Convention (*Kirchentag*) in Frankfurt am Main from

May 12 – 16, 2021. Together they established a joint steering group in April 2018. The event is expected to attract 180,000 visitors including representatives from EKHN's partner churches. (dk)

Sustainability and climate protection are becoming an increasingly significant principle of EKHN church action. In order to achieve this, measures and initiatives are broadly diversified; they include, for example, the environmentally friendly implementation of activities, urban gardening projects, energy-saving measures in the construction sector, electric mobility and others. An integrated climate protection concept aims to help reduce CO₂ emissions by 40 percent between 2005 and 2020. (dk)

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news letter

Diversity, Multiplicity and Tolerance

“My own country first!” As in other countries in Europe and worldwide, more and more populist tendencies are manifesting themselves in Germany. Thus a politically right-wing oriented party won seats in Hesse's state parliamentary elections last year. Such populist parties are characterized by national and nationalistic reasoning. Their criticism is a vigorous attack on liberal societies. The Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau (EKHN) recently adopted a clear position against this political mindset. In its “Orientation Guideline for Dealing with Right-Wing Populism”, the EKHN aims to assist its parishes in appropriately handling their dealings with rightist activist groups. “With its members, the Protestant Church mirrors society as a whole,” says Volker Rahn, pastor and press spokesperson for the EKHN: “Thus all political variations can be found among its parishes. Within the EKHN, however, only a few cases exist in which staff members are involved with populist parties. Quite to the contrary: a consensus is evident at the EKHN, in which right-wing populist tendencies and xenophobic statements are resolutely countered. Our orientation guideline clarifies this explicitly, too.”

How does one, for example, respond to persons who insist that “they alone understand the true will of their own people”? In Germany, as elsewhere, groups continue to claim that they speak “for the people as a whole”. In doing so, they incite fears among the general public with their barbed statements. Public statements made by such politicians often exhibit xenophobia, Islamophobia or homophobia. Many express contempt for the topic of gender equality and present a negative portrayal of other ethnic groups. And finally, populists undermine trust in government institutions, in democratic decisions and in the free press. The EKHN, in contrast, sees itself as part of an open society. “Our fundamental principles describe very clear objectives,” according to spokesperson Rahn: “They state, for example and as paraphrased here, that the devastating experiences made during Nazism led to the Church now advocating a society which positions itself towards diversity, multiplicity and tolerance.” That diversity and multiplicity are enriching, “this is something we experience over and over again in our international partnerships and in our coexistence with Christians from other countries in the midst of our society,” according to Detlev Knoche, Director of the



EKHN Provides its Parishes Orientation Guidance in Dealing with Right-Wing Populism

Ecumenical Center. Consistent with the EKHN document, it is necessary to honor “the right of freedom of expression and the dignity of every human being.” This is why “position must be taken against group-based misanthropy and the ostracizing of people with different opinions.” The guidance illustrates theological and biblical perspectives for taking on discussions on populism and also provides canonical advice for possible conflict situations. The EKHN expects of its parishes, and especially of its Church councils, that they are able to critically confront a populist attitude. At the same time, the guideline sees it as the responsibility of the Church leaders to take on a “double fundamental position.” On the one hand, it must defend its own position, and on the other hand, it must clearly declare populist statements as being problematic. At the same time, however, “every person must be treated with respect and esteem,” even if they represent extreme contrary opinions. The future will show how social and internal Church discussions will continue to evolve. At any rate it is the EKHN's hope that reason and tolerance will prove to be stronger than populism. (mkr)



Doubts are Allowed

A rift divides the country of Germany since 2015. This was the year that a multitude of refugees came to Germany. Many people lent a helping hand – they provided accommodations, offered food, drink and counsel. At the forefront: church congregations. But grumblings could also be heard. Not everyone thought it good that so many foreigners came in one fell swoop. But only a very few dared to express this out loud because the EKHN's policy was and is clear: foreigners are to be welcomed. In order to offer a platform for an open discussion of the different opinions among the general public and the Church, the Catholic and Protestant Christians in Frankfurt extended an invitation to all. The motto: "Doubts are allowed. Must Christians welcome everyone?"

During the event at a large inner city church, Volker Jung, the Church President, and Johannes zu Eitz, the Catholic City Dean, responded to the questions raised by the many participants. Clear communication rules were established in advance along with a stopwatch, everyone had a one minute time frame allotted for speaking. It was a constructive exchange with quite diverse views, but with clear own opinions and with regard for the opinions of others. Both the City Dean and the Church President were properly challenged as they alone responded to



Thoughtful faces: Johannes zu Eitz, the Catholic City Dean (left) and Volker Jung, the EKHN Church President (right).

the queries face-to-face with the questioners. The church leaders gained an even clearer picture of what their bases think and feel. But it was by no means all the guests that evening who viewed immigration as

a threat. Many stood up and reported about positive experiences. Altogether it was a successful contribution towards a democratic debate culture. The series is to be continued. (as)



Overcome Ruptures with La Porta

Clubs, handicapped people and migrants meet at the Café La Porta in Büdingen, a rather rural town. The Büdingen church parish, headed by Rev. Andreas Weik, rented the rooms as a meeting place and workshop for ideas. It is available free of charge for all who contribute their time and energy towards a peaceful, democratic and interdenominational society. Political parties or commercial interests are not permitted.

The intercultural meeting café is open on Monday evenings. On Thursday evenings the youth counselling and youth services groups offer a youth gathering open to all. The Lacrima Association is also present. It offers families suffering bereavements a meeting place each fourth Wednesday of a month.

Another participating group is the "Helping Hands" association. It is their goal to provide a setting where migrants can get to know each other and offer each other support. La Porta also holds a regular creative gathering. There items that would normally be thrown away are repaired or upgraded. La Porta, which translates as "the door" or "the portal", is free of any barriers – particularly in the minds of the helpers. The church parish provides fair trade coffee and tea, apple juice and mineral water from local suppliers in reusable glass bottles free of charge for groups that meet at La Porta.



Everybody is welcome: La Porta, which translates as "the door" or "the portal", is free of any barriers – particularly in the minds of the helpers..

As Sabine Bertram-Schäfer, Dean for the rural district surrounding Büdingen, points out, courage is also required for such a project. "That so many people of all ages from various countries gather here and organize their everyday lives is

just what we need. It is exactly this that allows us to serve as a beacon in town." The Church Council thinks of La Porta as a step in the right direction in order to overcome ruptures incurred by society. (ml)



Interview with Melanie Beiner

Melanie Beiner, Head of the EKHN's Department for Church Services, contributed to the Orientation Guideline for Dealing with Right-Wing Populism (see page 1). Andrea Seeger spoke with her about her work on this project:

How do you define right-wing populism?

The word 'populism' is derived from the Latin word 'populous', i.e., 'people'. It means that political parties or groups claim that they alone represent the interests of the people. Right-wing populism is understood when these groups spread right-wing populist, i.e., racist, xenophobic, anti-Semitic or Islamophobic content. Then people are marginalized

and excluded solely on the basis of their nationality, ethnicity or religion. They are robbed of their human dignity or find that their rights have been restricted.

Does the EKHN include members who are right-wing populists?

The EKHN is a community of Christians, and not a political organization. It includes people with many different political viewpoints from all sections of society. Thus it is certain that the Church members also

include those who make statements or represent opinions which can be described as right-wing populist. The point, however, is not about identifying people as being right-wing populists. Instead, the goal is to call attention to the problem. And this begins with our own prejudices, which we all presumably have. If, however, these prejudices are not challenged with a critical eye, but instead deliberately intensified while stoking fears against people of other nationalities or religions, then these people are discri-

minated against and an effective public dissemination takes place, marginalization and misanthropy can then suddenly become socially acceptable. This must not occur.

The Bible is not static for Protestant Christians. God's Word is to be understood in the context of the specific time and situation. Which biblical thoughts and illustrations help with this?

I find the parable of the Good Samaritan to be of particular importance here. It is not merely a story in which a man offers help to an injured person. The one who helped belonged to a group that was ostracized at the time. As Jesus pointed out: it is just those, against whom we

direct our prejudices, who help in an emergency. With this he unmasked the low opinion held towards others as prejudice. There are, however, still very many other biblical thoughts and illustrations: the Bible does not tire of saying that strangers should be welcomed, or that social and cultural divisions can be overcome within the community of Christians.

You recommend a double fundamental position when dealing with right-wing populists. What does this look like?

Matthias Blöser is our spokesperson for these questions at the EKHN's Center for Social Responsibility (Zentrum Gesellschaftliche Verantwortung - ZGV). He

recommends clearly and objectively countering right-wing populism while simultaneously treating the people expressing such sentiments with respect. This means specifically that, as a response to prejudicial statements, the person who made the statement is not to be attacked or demeaned, but rather is to clearly be told that the comment made is discriminating. Many people are initially surprised or shocked when others utter dismissive remarks. Then the listener often simply remains silent, or perhaps even agrees, in order not to appear impolite. It is possible to find language for those moments that is clearly distanced and objective, yet that communicates an open-minded attitude to the person being addressed. (as)