Dear sisters and brothers in Christ!

I’m sending you my greetings from Darmstadt and wish you a blessed Pentecost. This year’s Newsletter deals with the structural and personnel changes in our church.

The Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau (EKHN) has already brought about many reforms, e.g. the reinforcement of the deaneries. This work starts to bear fruits. The most significant change to be announced is the election of Dr. Volker Jung as Church President. Ecumenism and cooperation with partner churches are high up on his list of priorities.

This summer all congregations will elect new parish councils. For our church it is a blessing that so many people are prepared to get involved. Thanks to that so many people are preparing to take on a new role. Hence, we have invited new members to invite them to our church events. Edda Kahler is one of the 15,000 church council members who serve in 1,175 parishes of the EKHN. She is elected for a tenure of six years by all congregation members who are older than fourteen years. The members of the church council are responsible for congregational affairs and are supposed to encourage a Christian way of life within the parish. The council represents the parish in spiritual, as well as in legal matters. It sees to it that times set aside for church service are observed. And it elects the parish ministers. Also the council is responsible for parish property and real estate and it hires all parish employees. By virtue of their office, Parish ministers are church council members. However, when the vote is cast, their personnel, which are of concern for the entire church. Cooperation of salaried employees and volunteers is a basic principle in decision-making bodies of the EKHN. In deansery synods, as well as in the church synod the proportion of volunteers in relation to salaried employees is two to one. The three-stage structure of the EKHN – parish, deanery and the church at large – emanates from the “grass-root” level. Members of the parish council elect the members of the synod of the deaneries, and these in turn elect the church synod. In decision-making processes many people voice their opinion. Hence, individual persons and committees are usually dependent on the approval of others. At the level of the entire church the church synod, headed by the honorary Präs. exercises spiritual leadership and maintains ecclesiastic order church at large. It also represents the church in external matters. In essence it makes decisions in theological, legal, and financial matters, as well as in matters concerning personnel, which are of concern for the entire church. In particular it is concerned with the election of the Church President and the Provosts, i.e. Präs. The six Superintendents constitute the “Leading Spiritual Council”. Together with the Church President and his deputy this body has the leading Spiritual Council. Jo-Hanns Lehmann, a legal expert, deals with fundamental questions having to do with the structure of the EKHN. He says, “the EKHN is based on the synod principle. Office holders have limited tenure. Our ministers hold in each case a particular office. However, the EKHN also deploys deliberately non-ordained persons in spiritual leadership.” In the past years an initiative commenced with the attempt to revise the constitution of the EKHN, which has in essence remained unmodified for decades. The synod has studied the proposed constitutional changes carefully. However, it remains to be seen, whether they will be approved by the necessary majority in the next synod sessions. In the meantime local parishes have to face other challenges. They want to motivate as many people as possible to go and cast their ballot in the church council election in June.

International Financial Crisis - God Sides with the Poor

The international financial crisis which is affecting more or less all of us in the different countries around the world initiated a theological debate in our Church about ethical criteria and rules for the financial and banking sectors. We are convinced that an economic system which is based on freedom needs also rules for functioning. This crisis is a result of different reasons: individual greed, a financial system which is no longer related to the real economy and which is not under effective control.

Our lives, as well as all other blessings are not of our own making; they emanate out of God’s grace and mercy. This is one of our fundamental convictions. Therefore we are asked to use the blessings of the world to make it possible for all human beings to participate in the richness of the world. Out of God’s gifts and with human labor the well-being of all can grow. That means: economy has to serve the life – not only the life of individuals but of the whole community.

From this theological point of view EKHN is asking the persons responsible in politics and economics to develop an economy which makes a good life possible for all human beings, which does not exploit the earth, saves the atmosphere and the natural climate and which acts in solidarity with the poor. With this we are referring to the world-wide ecumenical process “Economy in the Service of Life / AGAPE” which has been initiated by the World Council of Churches (see www.ekkoueme.org), the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (see www.warc.ch), and Lutheran World Federation (see www.lutheranworld.org).

The Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau (EKHN) will elect new church councils. In Friedberg-Fauerbach, a small town in the North of the metropolitan area of Frankfurt, the fifty year old Edda Kahler will run for the third time for a position in the local council. She is one of thirteen candidates in the parish and her chances of being re-elected to this executive committee are good. In the past she helped in the preparation of Sunday School. Now she does volunteer work on the editorial staff of the parish newsletter and participates also in making visits to members of the congregation. As she says, “there is a considerable degree of fluctuation in our parish. Hence, we have to visit new members to invite them to our church events.”

All together all over the world.
Fields of Activity in the Deanship of the Bergstraße

As a fundraiser, the deanery has a coordinator for fundraising – e.g. it has set up a bank account for donations, issue receipts, and to make transactions transparent. “Donors have to be able to trace how their donations are used.” Success depends most of all on the effort that is put into relationships. Not only does it matter that contacts are established, they also have to be cultivated on a sustained basis. Moreover, donors must also be involved in the particular projects. The whole discussion evolves around people and around communities, as well as around the challenge of finding friends and cultivating friendships. In contrast to that the problem of raising money is only mentioned in passing. That makes Christian Rupp happy. Gleefully he explains, “for those in charge it is very, very important to recognize that fundraising is much more than a strategy, used to plug holes in the budget or to save insufficiently financed projects.” Church congregations should start seeing the task of soliciting financial support as an integral part of their mission. This mission, as cannot be stressed strongly enough, has to do with bringing the “Word of the Gospel to mankind.”

Questions addressed to Volker Jung

As Dean you were one of the co-founders of the initiative “Demonstrating Courage against xenophobia, hate mongering, and extremism from rightist groups. Will you also take a pronounced stance on these issues in your capacity as Church President?

It goes without saying that this is a theological attitude. One practises it in the church, regardless of what particular office one holds. The duty of participating in life as it is lived is in essence an integral part of the Christian faith. The Gospel contains guidelines for an ethical life. As a Christian I don’t just want to abide by these rules as a private person. It is much rather my intent to stand up for these guiding principles in public debates. In this spirit I joined the discussion concerning the expansion of the Frankfurt airport right after my inauguration. In my statements I pointed out that the flying ban at night is of utmost importance. Further, thousands of people in this region. I feel that if the church is to get involved in debates of social and political significance, the prerequisites must be fulfilled. First of all the issues must be of relevance to our Christian mission. Secondly, we technically competent enough to make valid statements? And finally, it would be highly desirable that our church gets involved in these particular issues. You are regarded as a minister who is close to young people. What priorities do you have in regard to juvenile programs? Do you have definite plans?

Juvenile programs are managed exceptionally well within the EKHN. The juvenile program delegates are very much appreciated in the synod. Protestant youths are visible in the Educational Center. Here they are represented by the Protestant Youth in Hesse and Nassau (EJHN). Other youth organizations, such as the YMCA and the Protestant Youth Association (EJW) are well organized. As Church President I will always have an attentive, open ear for these matters. Contacts have already been established.

The former Church President Peter Steinacker travelled a lot. Ecumenical affairs were of particular interest to him. Will you follow in his footsteps, as far as mobility goes? Or will you pursue a different policy?

Ecumenical partnerships are close to my heart. For this reason we invited representatives from the partner churches to attend the official change of office on 15 February and are proud that they all came. They actively helped to organize the church service. During this consultation I have established significant ecumenical contacts. From my time as Dean in the Vogelsberg District I am already familiar with the profound partnership with the Church in India. Some time in the future I will certainly pay inaugural visits to the partner churches. However, before that I would like to concentrate my time and energy on the current challenges of the EXKHN. In the meantime my deputy, Cordelia Kopsch, will accompany this fall Bishop Wolfgang Huber, Chairperson of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), when he leads a delegation of the EKD, destined to visit our partner church in South Korea. On the agenda will be the dialogue with North Korea. The EXKHN has helped to get it started. Christians from North and South Korea met for the second time in our Academy in Arnoldshain. We would like to continue to support these contacts. If you were allowed to make three wishes for your period of office, what would they be?

First: May as many people as possible be spared the misery caused by the current worldwide economic crisis. Next: May the EXKHN be credited with strengthening a Christian faith, which will also have a beneficial impact on society, much rather than making headlines having to do with structures and finances. Last wish: May the Holy Spirit rejuvenate our Christian faith. May it strengthen our modesty and the understanding amongst churches and Christians.