Editorial

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I send you greetings from the Church in Hesse and Nassau (EKHN), and wish you a blessed Pentecost. Last year in October Christians from all over the world met in Busan for the 10th General Assembly of the World Council of Churches. In the unity statement they urged one another “to remain committed to the primary purpose of the fellowship of churches in the World Council of Churches: to call one another to visible unity in one faith and in one Eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through witness and service to the world and to advance towards that unity in order that the world may believe.” At Pentecost this vision unites Christians all over the world, transcending confessional and theological barriers.

This year the focus of our newsletter looks at the situation of refugees in Germany and in the area covered by our church. In our society reservations are expressed towards the refugees over and over again. Overcoming these misgivings and creating a culture of hospitality, this is what we consider our mission as followers of Jesus.

May God’s Spirit strengthen our ecumenical fellowship.

Yours in Christ,

Rev. Detlev Knoche

Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau

The Pilgrimage for Justice and Peace Can Begin

An EKHN delegation of twelve persons participated as guests at the 10th General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Busan, South Korea. One of the central messages of the meeting was: the unity of the church, the unity of the human community and the unity of all of creation belong together. That basic theological differences must be overcome on the path to this unity also became clear. There the personal encounters and conversations were important steps which can lead to understanding, respect and tolerance. A highlight for many participants was the adoption of the declaration for a just peace, which includes the environmental turnaround, climate justice and fair economic housekeeping. Here the facts speak for themselves, the necessity for specific actions was named and self-commitments were adopted. The delegates in Busan also agreed that the current prevalent global culture doesn’t question social, economic and environmental inequality, but rather legitimates them. It violates human dignity and de-stroys God’s creation. For this the church worldwide are called upon to orient themselves toward Jesus “as the righteousness of God.” An “economy of life” serves as model for human needs. The ideology of growth is contrasted by an “enough” which honors the dignity of all human beings, takes the limitations of resources seriously and shows solidarity.

News Items

Alliances for the Protection of Work-Free Sundays. EKHN participates in “Alliances for the Protection of Work-Free Sundays” in several cities. Reasons behind this are the plans to increasingly make exceptions, and permit a greater number of stores to be open on Sundays. Keeping Sundays work-free has been a legally protected right since the year 1700. According to Ulrike Schierf, Deputy Church President, the church does not only support work-free Sundays “because we celebrate church services on this day, but also to send a message against a round-the-clock society and the commercialization of life.” Performance and profit maximization should not become dominant forces in life. “We must ask ourselves, what is truly important in life. Sunday reminds us that our life is not dependent on our own performance and efforts, but rather that it is a gift.”

Synod Approves a New Order for Church Life. In June last year the Synod passed a new order for church life. It took almost 10 years to complete work on the approx. 40 page revised version of the “Order for Church Life in the Protestant Church of Hesse and Nassau (EKHN).” It replaces provisions that, for the most part, dated back to 1962. Besides a commission of the church leadership and committees of the church synod, participants in the extensive process also included university theologians, 196 parish congregations and 14 deenary synods.

The Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) Appointed Dr. Sigurd Rink (Provoost of the Church District Süd-Nassau) as the New Bishop for the Armed Forces in Germany. In a first statement Dr. Rink said: “I understand this new ministry as a service to the men and women soldiers in the Armed Forces and to their families. As soldiers they must always carry a very high ethical responsibility in the various situations they are confronted with.” The Evangelical Church in Germany will he stand for the model of a “just peace” as it is formulated in the Peace Memorandum of the EKD.

Young People Strengthen our Partnerships. Various youth encounter programs within the scope of EKHN partnerships with the church synod and with the EKD. Church work is committed to refugees and vulnerable life is not dependent on our own performance and efforts, but rather that it is a gift.”

The President of EKHN is Chairman of the “Chamber for Refugees” in Hesse and Nassau (EKHN), and was also a member of the German government’s Advisory Committee on Integration in Germany (EKD). And was also a member of the German government’s Advisory Committee on Integration in Germany (EKD). There are more refugees worldwide now than there have been in the past two decades. According to the UN there are currently more than 45 million refugees. Nearly half of them are children and adolescents under the age of 16. The main reason for these increasing numbers are tides of refugees, the source of which can be traced to the armed conflicts in Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia as well as in Sudan and the Congo.

In Germany, too, the number of those seeking protection and asylum has again risen significantly. About 100,000 people sought refuge here in 2013. The number of arriving refugees presents a great challenge. For example, it currently takes 18 months or longer for the authorities to process asylum requests. It is difficult for the judges to provide good expert advice. It is also difficult to find living space for them. EKHN and Diakonie, the social welfare organization of the church, have been and continue to be fully committed to their work for and with refugees: at information centers, at the state run “Reception Centers for Newly Arrived Refugees,” with their own accommodations for refugees and, by no means least, by the voluntary involvement found in many church congregations. The EKHN Board supports these activities. According to Dr. Volker Jung, President of EKHN: “One of the elementary functions of Christianity and of the churches is: the protection of the stranger. No command is found as often in the Bible as the one, which entreats us to protect the strangers.” The Bible describes God’s instruction, to welcome strangers: “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” (Leviticus 19:33-34) And Jesus says: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”

“God’s instructions are clear. The Church and the Diakonie implement this command in their work when they champion the rights of the refugees and locally support those who are affected,” Jung emphasizes. The President of EKHN is Chairman of the “Chamber for Migration and Integration” of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), and was also a member of the German government’s Advisory Committee on Integration in Berlin until 2013.

Protestant Church Wants to Strengthen the Welcome Culture for Refugees

Given the increase in the amount of refugees, the EKHN Synod approved an additional one million euro at the end of last year. This is to be used to support church work which is committed to refugees and a welcoming culture. In addition projects are to be supported, as, for example, a trauma center in Kirkuk, in northern Iraq, and a school in Syria.

Despite the new challenges caused by the increasing numbers of refugees, an international comparison still applies: Europe does relatively little for the protection of the refugees,” the EKHN’s intercultural representative, Andreas Lipsch, explains. The countries that currently let in the most refugees are Afghanistan’s neighboring states Pakistan and Iran, as well as Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. “Each and every one of these countries accepts more refugees every year, than all member countries of the European Union put together,” Lipsch reminds us. Of the 2.2 million Syrians who are currently displaced, merely 55,000 sought protection in Europe.

With view to the largest refugee catastrophe in this century to date, EKHN also works on a political level, campaigning to assure that Germany, along with the other European countries, becomes more involved in the protection of refugees, and that it doesn’t continue to distance itself from these refugees. Many thousands who tried to reach Europe in the past years have died on the sea and at its borders. “This European tragedy must come to an end,” says Church President Jung, “It is high time, that the European Union opens its borders for those seeking refuge.”
“People of the Church Saved Us”

They made it to Germany, to a spot beneath a bridge spanning the Main River. They collected bottles to survive. When Oliver Liaz Emere speaks with his family back home in Nigeria, he claims that everything is all right. Those who make it to Europe can work and earn money, this is the widespread assumption in Africa. Emere is ashamed. “The people here don’t want to be supported. They want to work and to earn their own livelihods,” says Reverend Ulrich Schaffert from the Dietrich-Bonhoeffer parish. He was there in early November when five of Frankfurt’s congregations spontaneously decided to offer 22 Africans a roof over their heads in the protestant Cantate Domino Church. A few days later they moved, to another church. There they also receive legal and psychosocial counseling. The helpfulness of the church congregations was great. Within only a few hours mattresses and blankets and lengths of cloth were organized. A carpentry shop put up wooden partitions to insulate a bit more privacy. This they did free of charge. Between two and three refugees now sleep in each of the small separated spaces. Blankets and lengths of cloth serve as doors. Room numbers or names are posted on the wooden partitions, and a slip of paper with rules for living together are put up on one of the walls: “We need encounters, and the people must also experience good times together,” says Reverend Sabine Frölich. The biggest hope the men have, though, is for a work permit. As it is for all the others, it is also Oliver Liaz Emere’s wish to earn enough money in order to be able to return to his home someday. Will that work out? “I do not know, only God knows what my future holds.” (rh)

From Church Asylum into the Legal Asylum Process

A happy end, for now, for the refugee family from Somalia, who spent months under church asylum at the parsonage in the village of Billertshausen: the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees permitted family leave – Abdala Moussa to leave their church asylum in Billertshausen, and to stay in Germany legally during their further asylum application procedures. Somalia, 2011. Civil war reigns along with famine and despair. Warlords, militia and rebels rule the East African country. Seventy percent of the population does not have access to clean drinking water. More than a million people flee the country that year. Germany, 2013. Billertshausen is Hessen, an idyllic village with a population of 200 people. Well-tended old half-timbered homes line the streets. Colorful clothes and children’s clothing wave from a clothesline in the courtyard of the parsonage. They belong to a refugee family from Somalia. The family has found sanctuary in the barn of the parsonage. Reverend Walter Bernbeck and his wife, Ursula, along with the congregation’s parish council want to protect the family from imminent deportation by granting them church asylum. They negotiate with the public authorities for a possible residence status for the family - all legal, social and humanitarian aspects are examined yet again. The residence permit is to be granted after all. A look back to Somalia in the year 2011. Twenty-nine year old Mohammed decides that he no longer wants to live in the country so shattered by the civil war. He gathers up his pregnant wife, Naima, and flies - via Ethiopia, Sudan and Libya to Italy. On foot, by bus, by car and finally across the Mediterranean by boat. It takes them a month to reach their goal: Europe. More precisely: Lampedusa off of Sicily. There are no longer only two of them, but three of them. At the first moment, they were born during their flight. But in Italy the family is quickly confronted with the hardship of refugee policies. They have no food, no roof over their heads, they don’t know the language and they have neither legal status nor medical care. Naima is pregnant again, this time with twins. In January 2012 they set off on their journey to Germany. Here they hope for better conditions. The residents of Billertshausen are helpful. “People donated toys and children’s clothes and a baby carriage for twins,” Ursula Bernbeck reports. “One woman from the village gave the family German lessons. There was an amazing, great willingness to support the family.” Then 24-year old Naima was pregnant with her fourth child. This was a high-risk pregnancy following the difficult birth of the twins. By law, a pregnant woman may not be deported as of the 30th week. Now the asylum procedure could officially be applied for in Germany, deportation back to Italy could be avoided. A final decision regarding their asylum application is still pending. (cs)