

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 legitimizes them. It violates human dignity and destroys God's creation. For this the churches 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. (dk)

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 for business on Sundays. Keeping Sundays work-free has been a legally protected right since the year 1700. According to Ulrike Scherf, 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. Sundays remind us that our life is not dependent on our own performance and efforts, but rather that it is a gift." (dk)

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 deanery synods. (dk)

The Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) Appointed Dr. Sigurd Rink (Provost 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." As representative of the Evangelical Church in Germany he will stand for the model of a "just peace" as it is formulated in the Peace Memorandum of the EKD. (dk)

Young People Strengthen our Partnerships. Various youth encounter programs within the scope of EKHN partnerships with the churches in Africa, Asia and the USA strengthen ecumenical relationships and give them new impulses. The most recent examples include participation at camps for young confirmation candidates sponsored by the United Church of Christ in the USA, or the newly established school partnership between the Albert Schweitzer School in Alsfeld and the Henry Baker College in Mellukavumattom, in the Indian state of Kerala. (dk)

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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



news letter

"... and you welcomed me"

Protestant Church Wants to Strengthen the Welcome Culture for Refugees

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 18. 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 to offer the refugees 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 in 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 to step up for persecuted and vulnerable peoples. 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." (Matthew 25:35)

"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.



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 insure 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." (mkr/al)

Future uncertain: The woman sits with her belongings at the refugee camp in Ingelheim, waiting and wondering, where she'll be next.

“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 livelihoods,” 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 sleeping bags, food and warm clothing were organized. A carpentry shop put up wooden partitions to insure 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: alcohol and cigarettes are not allowed, the door must be locked as of midnight, two people are assigned daily to clean the



Partitions are designed to provide the refugees at least a little private atmosphere in the Frankfurt church.

small kitchen and the toilet area. Despite difficult personal situations, a routine is slowly returning to the day-to-day lives of the men in the Gutleut Church. They can shower in the nearby social welfare center, lunch is available in the coffee shop, German lessons take place in small groups. These are coordinated on a voluntary basis by Uli Tomaschowski from the “Teachers on the road” project. Until now he taught in the church vestibule, where posters with the ABCs hang on the walls along with sentences such as “I am tired” or “I am thinking of my mother”. Sixty seven volunteers have come forward so far, all who want to help teach. “The people

are very eager to learn,” Tomaschowski said, and the teachers get great pleasure from their classes. In order to take advantage of the situation, church employees organized a soccer game for the day. “We need encounters, and the people must also experience good times together,” says Reverend Sabine Fröhlich. 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 Isse – Abdala Mousa 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 in Hessen, an idyllic village with a population of 200 people. Well-tended old half-timbered homes line the streets. Colorful cloths 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, and a 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 flees – 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. Achmed, their first son, was 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



Naima cooks for her family.

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)



Refugee Reverend Peter Oldenbruch..

Right to Apply for Asylum

persons. People there are housed in two buildings which stood empty for years. Additional buildings are to be refurbished within the coming months so that about 500 persons can get a first roof over their heads.

Young girls and boys make their rounds on bicycles between the long, single-storied buildings. All these sets of wheels come from donations. The children either attend Kindergarten, or they are taught school lessons. The adults are not entitled to German lessons. But Refugee

Reverend Peter Oldenbruch thinks it is very important for the people in this facility to have the opportunity to take German classes, and has asked the Church for appropriate funding. After all, the people must wait one to two years before a decision is made on their applications for asylum. He often hears the statement, “but we cannot take them all in.” This may be true, but everyone should have the right to file an asylum request. “We cannot betray human rights on the Mediterranean,” Oldenbruch says with view to the many people who have drowned in the

Mediterranean while attempting to flee. The deportation prison is located within striking distance of these buildings. A high, grey concrete wall blocks the view in both directions.

There the people are lodged who lived in the area illegally, who have no rights for asylum in Germany and who are to be deported. Refugee Reverend Peter Oldenbruch makes his rounds through the deportation prison twice a week. The prison holds up to 152 prisoners who are to be deported. “Why am I here, what have I done wrong?” they ask the Reverend. He is then faced with

the arduous task of trying to explain the German Aliens Act to them which, for example, does not permit a person who has applied for asylum in France to visit a relative in Germany.

Some of the inmates in the deportation prison ask for tobacco or telephone cards, while others simply want to talk. When their deportation date arrives, Oldenbruch gives each of the detainees 30 Euros. This is not much, not even in Italy, to where many are sent back because they arrived there after crossing the Mediterranean. Reason for this is the Dublin Regulation. This is the name

of the act which states that a refugee must apply for asylum in that European country, in which she or he first set foot on the continent. Since the “number one refugee escape route” has been the Mediterranean for quite a while, most of the refugees first arrive in Lampedusa, which belongs to Italy. As soon as they arrive at the border, a fingerprint is taken and is filed in the Eurodac database. If they then still make it to Sweden, Germany or to the Netherlands, and apply for asylum in one of these countries, their fingerprint reveals where they first arrived in Europe. Normally they are then sent back to this country. (rh)