

Challenging Diversity

The situation between mainline churches and migrant communities in Germany

1. Introduction

Challenging Diversity: Diversity is always challenging. The variety of lifestyles, political opinions or religious beliefs questions my own choice. What is appropriate? What makes sense? What is cool? When it comes to the religious situation in Germany, this challenging diversity becomes more than obvious:

One third of the German population calls itself Protestant in a broad meaning of the term with many different denominations such as Lutheran, Reformed-Presbyterian, United, Methodist, Mennonite, Baptist, Pentecostal, and Charismatic). One third is a member to the one and only Roman-Catholic church, and finally one third is just different, with a wide range of non Christians (Muslims, Atheists, Hindus, Buddhists, Bah'ai etc...) to an Orthodox background.

Religious migration is difficult to treat in each of these groups. Roman-Catholic ecclesiology sees just fellow Catholics with different mother tongues. Protestants are always used to and sometimes suffer from the wide range of different denominations, while the presence of other religions in Germany is part of a migration process itself that has come into play only a few decades ago. I now shall focus on the challenging diversity among mainline and migrant Protestants from the perspective of the EKD, the Evangelical Church in Germany as the "main mainline church" on the Protestant side, not so much in terms of theological quality or ecclesiastical status but just in numbers of the church members and its public standing thanks to the German church tax system which provides the EKD with extensive means.

2. Situation

When we try to get an idea of the presence of Protestant migrants in Germany we can at least distinguish three types of migrant churches – although the situation is probably much more complex and difficult:

1. We get historic migrant churches who maintain institutionalised relations to the EKD (Finnish, Swedish, Dutch). Those relations are mutually arranged, which means that German speaking congregations in the respective countries receive strong support from the local churches. The cooperation between the partners is well developed on all levels.
2. You will find migrant congregations from the former communist states that have come to Germany for political exile and those who are in loose contact with the EKD (Hungarian, Latvian and Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese groups). Still there are negotiations in progress for further integration and cooperation.
3. There are migrant communities that have developed a vibrant social and religious life which does not necessarily include strong organisational structures or official institutions (most of African descent, but also among migrants from many other parts of the world).

This third type is particularly challenging: their numbers are increasingly high, not only in Germany. You can find 95 African churches - just in Hamburg. And they are spreading all over the country. Their specific approaches towards theology, understanding of the Bible and ecclesiology may differ from mainline positions (although they are multiple, too). Their perception of the ministry, the role of bishops or preachers is not necessarily comparable to the hierarchies of the federal church system in Germany.

Just to give you an example: an African preacher in Cologne gets inspired by the Holy Spirit. He founds a new worship group which he names the “Church of the true light of Christ”. Among his ten followers he calls himself bishop and then – in a rather unspectacular matter – he picks up the phone dialling the number of the EKD church office and wants to speak to Bishop Käßmann. Just to talk from Bishop to Bishop. Finally he gets upset because his request was turned down by the officer in Hannover.

Hence the role of cultural diversity within the discourse on denominational unity has often been underestimated. However, the alienation is on both sides: Not only German white Lutheran Protestants feel a little “uncomfortable” in an lively African worship with dancing and hands clapping for at least three hours – *if* they ever happen to experience such a Sunday service. Also many believers let’s say from Ghana are “surprised” when they ever make their way accidentally into an indigenous German Presbyterian service. Where are laughter and the cheerful songs, where is true worship and real fraternity? It is probably because of this cultural diversity that many African Christians in Germany today think that native German Christianity is dead and that Germans need to be evangelised again, through something that they call a “reverse mission”. Yet this “reverse mission” doesn’t make the encounter easier between sisters and brothers from native and migrant backgrounds.

3. Prospectus

What to do with this challenging situation? Well, I personally think we need new strategies on all levels, not only for ecumenism or charity but also in the question of how we can equally meet in the name of Jesus Christ. And, furthermore, how can we contribute *as churches and religious communities* to the social integration of migrants in our European societies?

In the past years the EKD has been rather reluctant to realise the need for religious or denominational integration. But things are changing even among EKD officials. Today the EKD is developing a policy to establish better contacts with *all* types of migrant churches in order to enable a sparkling experience of the worldwide dimension of Christianity just outside our church door. (And in my opinion it would be even more appropriate to aim for an experience not only outside the church doors but *inside* our churches!) Enabling a mutual integration process seems possible only if we let migrants keep and maintain their cultural identity, their own language and worship traditions. But this is still controversial also in the political integration process. I am confident that we as churches can help developing a good and helpful practice for social integration that includes migrants as precious human beings with their own specific contribution to Western societies.

Not only since the European integration process we need some joint European efforts to welcome the Christian strangers without forgetting the cultural and lingual differences that might still divide us to a certain extent. As for all movements on the European stage, these efforts must take into account the diversity of states and national policies as well as regional differences in the situation of the religious status quo and its migrant dimension. CCME and CEC are working on this prospect and the “Year 2010 of the European Churches responding to Migration” shall be an important contribution to that effort.