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Mission in a Post-Christian Society

I. ”Go to All the Nations“

”Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit“.

Its golden letters shining brightly, this biblical saying extracted from Matthew 28 is to be found at the front of the Berlin Mission vintage brick building. The building is situated in East Berlin, in the district of Friedrichshain. During the whole era of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) this Bible verse had bravely attested the Great Commission of Jesus Christ in an atheistic environment.

Regarding its self-conception the society of the GDR was a ”post-Christian society“ carried to extremes. Religion was conceived as an obsolete ideology. The official philosophy taught that, according to law, socialism had to succeed capitalism, both followed on by communism. The steeples surmounted the rooftops of the socialist towns solely as a remnant of capitalist times. They would have vanished some day. Why then should there be state subsidies to build new churches or preserve the Lord’s houses being in need of repair. As regards the church buildings in the eastern federal states of Germany, it was high time the GDR ceased to exist. If the GDR had existed 20 years longer, many churches most probably would have collapsed. Therefore already 2000 out of 8000 churches existing at present in the new federal states have been renovated since 1989. Today they are a visible sign for Christian tradition again, a tradition that fills us with hope.

But how can we members of the Evangelical Church in Berlin-Brandenburg-Silesian Upper Lusatia (EKBO) fill this sign with content? How can we win people to find their hope in Christian faith? How can we organize ”mission in a post-Christian society“?

II. The End of the ”Former People’s Church“ in the East and the West

The subject of your conference here at Göteborg is ”Baptism“ and ”Life from Baptism“. As a guest from Germany I would like to tell you of the experiences we have gathered up to now, gathered in a situation – I dare say - that is much different of yours.

Our situation has dramatically changed in the last two decades. However, I have to distinguish between Western and Eastern experiences. For my church – the EKBO – has been the only regional church to the present to directly connect East and West. Soon (at Whitsun 2012) the new ”North Church“ will share this function with us, but this will still last some time.

Until today the population living in the territory of the former GDR have strongly been determined by a common Marxist atheism - we often refuse to believe it. Many male and female citizens still regard the church as a social and mainly substantial discontinued model. The Western variety of a creeping unchurching having developed in the Federal Republic of Germany needs to be distinguished from the Eastern state of affairs. To date the conditions within the western peoples's church have yet allowed to refer to people growing away from church life mainly as baptized persons – as a rule they have known the principles of Christian Faith by experiencing ecclesiastical instruction, religious education und religious ceremonies. In the meantime the west as well has to face a constantly growing number of people who have not undergone church socialization and who only superficially know Christian faith from the outside, this faith being strange to their hearts.

Though coming from different points of origin, there is indeed common ground for East and West we have to adjust to: It is essential that we invite people no longer being determined by Christianity to our Christian community. This is a novelty for our regional churches so far – in the East as well as in the West – being used to trust in "biological" regeneration guaranteed by the parishes, that is: passing faith through the family. We cannot rely on it anymore.

The situation by numbers:

Annually the EKBO loses 1,7 % of its members. By absolute numbers that are 19,000 people (or to picture the number: 23 parishes with 800 members each). When comparing our figures to the demographic development, we lose more members than inhabitants move away. Even where the total population grows, such as in Berlin, we register a decreasing number of parishioners. In Berlin twice as much people leave the Church compared to other dioceses of the EKBO. When comparing the figures of the EKBO to those of the East German regional churches, the former are at medium range. Altogether we feature a rather steady number of baptisms within our church. Adult baptism has displayed a decrease from 20 % to 17 % in the last five years. Infant baptism (with reference to the birth rate) has displayed a steady figure of some 14 %. Regarding infant baptism, in merely 50 % of the cases both parents belong to a Christian church.

Not only through baptism does the church win members but also through re-entry of former church members. In the East of Germany about one third of the people belonging to no denomination had formerly been members of Evangelical churches. This is a major group of potential church members. Annually our church wins an average of 1700 people re-entering, however, that accounts for only 17 % of all newly acquired church members. Altogether the number of church members joining us annually by re-entering or by being baptized amounts to less than 1 % of the total membership figure.

III. The variety of the milieus

For sure my regional church is the one belonging to the EKD that has to unite the most significant differences in terms of milieu. Five different milieus can be found in the EKBO:

1. The West Berlin (inner city) milieu:
   The children of the members of the 1968 generation – those having been coined by the anti-bourgeois movement and the critique of the institutions in the late sixties and early seventies - have by now got children who had not been baptized. There are a growing number of people who do not meet Christians in their personal and familiar surroundings in the centre of West Berlin. Among the opinion leaders and persons in charge of our city, within the media, the parties, the schools, the economy and the associations we may increasingly discover personalities having important functions while having little interest in Church and religion. Sometimes we speak of the ”alphabetization“ in order to offer something to journalists, politicians and business leaders when making off-the-record conversation and in order to convey once again which part the Church as an institution can take, will take and does actually take in our society. We have to oppose the sensation of church life progressively being distorted.

2. The people living in prefabricated buildings in East Berlin:
   This is where districts feature only some three per cent members belonging to the Evangelical parish and three per cent members belonging to the Catholic parish. Otherwise the greatest number of juveniles lives in these districts. How can mission look like in these districts? Let us imagine we would in fact be successful in establishing new parishes there. It would be parishes where the treasure of the Evangelical tradition and piety of Johann Sebastian Bach and Paul Gerhardt, of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer could hardly be delivered to posterity.

3. The exurbs of Berlin:
   There are many middle-class development areas with quite a number of new inhabitants moving in. Frequently they come from the west of Germany and still are coined in the sense of the ”former people’s church“. I live in such a parish, its number of baptizands and confirmands being amazing. Indeed a very lively parish!

4. The medium-sized towns of Brandenburg and Silesian Upper Lusatia:
   They often have parishes that are financially sound and capable of surviving. But these towns also include the ”others“, those sixty to eighty per cent of the population who should get to know the Gospel. Since there live many people who had a position of authority in GDR times, the Christian parishes struggle with kindly inviting these fellow citizens to congregational life.

5. The rural areas of Brandenburg und Silesian Upper Lusatia:
   That’s the typical scene: A village with ten to twenty per cent Christians, sometimes just 5 per cent - anyhow, in the centre of the village there is a rural church, hundreds of years old and serving as a stone witness to the rich Christian tradition of Brandenburg. The parish is too small in relation to such a

large church building, being of historical significance. But vital associations for saving village churches, joined by Christians and non-Christians alike, take care of preserving these cultural assets.

IV. The Variety of Theological Challenges

Theological challenges within my church differ considerably too. The situation in West Berlin has evermore been determined by the challenge of the interfaith dialogue. The situation in East Berlin and Brandenburg as well as Christian life in Silesian Upper Lusatia are characterized by the conflict with the besetting atheism specified above. I would like to sketch both situations:

1. The change in the public sensation of ”religion“ initiated by the interreligious situation.

   Religion is an issue again, and that is a surprise to Berlin – whether West or East. For Berlin has always liked to call itself a ”world capital of atheism“ (according to the sociologist *Peter Berger*). Both the left-wing scene and the left-liberal scene in West Berlin and of course the scene inclining towards a besetting atheism in East Berlin had rather assumed that religion sooner or later would become outlived. It is primarily the Muslim migrants who compel an examination of religiosity. It seems to be the plainest solution to banish religion from public life. Laicistic tendencies, eliminating religion class from state schools, equal treatment of all religions while deliberately pushing back Christian institutions that are considered to be too privileged – all that is typical for the reality of Berlin, particularly in political and social life.

   However, when talking to politicians and putting something up for public discussion we hold the opinion that religion belongs to public life and that an integration of migrants will only be possible if the religious belief of our fellow men is taken seriously, whether they are native or have newly come to us.

   I am convinced that we in Germany have a proven model for integrating religion into public life in a partner-like and critical manner. The religious communities have the chance to organize themselves in such a way they can influence civil society as a critical partner. Please note: It has to do with ”religious communities“, not alone with the Christian churches. Islam has the same chances, rights and duties as the Christian churches. Though, it still has not laid the foundations in most areas for actually seizing the opportunities present. Assuming a superficial understanding of equality might inevitably result in pushing back the Christian churches and their traditional influence on society in the world of today.
   Slowly does awareness grow that it is better to accept religion in public life and to publicly cultivate it in this way. I am firmly convinced that renouncing such a public cultivation of religion would promote fundamentalist ideas. That is why we as the Evangelical Church in Berlin put ourselves forward for being a partner that is experienced in religious matters and that is prepared to contribute its experience to the new challenge of interfaith dialogue.

2. The aftermath of the GDR's anti-church tradition.

   Since the GDR has ceased to exist atheism as decreed by the state has lost its machinery of power and its propaganda tools formerly supporting the powers that be. Thus atheism became silent and was reduced to just one of many ideological guide lines determining the life of the people in a pluralistic society.[1] Many people were used to the way of living prescribed by the state and to its respective lifestyle. They do not know another life than a life without religion and the Church and more than ever without God. To some extent this besetting atheism is "the most successful legacy of real socialism" (*Wolf Krötke*). There is an atheistic atmosphere in many schools. Parents tacitly expect that the tradition of the atheistic "youth dedication ceremony" will be continued instead of confirmation as a class. "Religion" is a taboo subject. Religion is still considered to be a relict of the past. We say that people belonging to a second or third generation without Christian faith have "forgotten that they forgot God". And they do not really want to be reminded of this fact.

I have roughly sketched two different mental milieus. On the whole the missionary situation is characterized by the factor that there is no clearly structured counterpart. We are "diaspora", in fact. But the classic term of diaspora assumes that the denomination of the majority can definitely be determined. Quite the reverse, we have to face a strongly heterogeneous counterpart.

V. Heading to a "Missionary People's Church"

I would like to come back to the golden letters shining brightly at the front of the Berlin Mission vintage brick building: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit". How can we be a missionary church in our present situation?

I wish this question to be understood as an ecclesiological question: What kind of church do we need in Berlin, in Brandenburg and in Silesian Upper Lusatia in order to credibly testify and live the Gospel in manifold circumstances? To my mind the ecclesiological approach is the right approach since our environment judging Christianity so critical reveals that people will turn towards Christianity if two conditions are fulfilled:

1. The Church as a social factor of public life requires atmospheric surroundings to be positively appreciated. If a parish takes a positive part in the life of the village or the city, the Church will overcome its image of a "discontinued model" it does have in an environment determined by atheism. Therefore it should for example contribute to celebrations and ceremonies and it should actively try to meet social challenges, such as poverty or the integration of migrants. In other words: We have to be a "legible institution" so that people as individuals *can* be interested in Christian faith at all.

[1] Cf. to the following: *Wolf Krötke*, "Atheismus in der Diskussion". Ceremonial address celebrating the 50th anniversary of the EZW (Evangelical Central Department for World View Matters). In "Materialdienst der EZW 12/2010", pp. 443 ff.).

2. There have to be individual meetings, from person to person. Faith can only be communicated by establishing a relationship of trust between open-minded people. It happens in professional life when the colleague reveals himself as being a Christian, at social work when the church worker seems to be reliable, in our Evangelical schools when the teachers convey our Christian value orientation and also live it, and it happens within the congregation when the lived faith of groups and circles is felt keenly in its church members. That is to say: We as full-time and voluntary staff together with the members of the congregations have to become ”qualified“ as to matters of faith. In order to achieve this aim we need to be native within a church feeling obliged to approach this very ideal.

At this point we should step up to a *Trinitarian understanding* of our *missio*, our mission, in order to meet the challenges mentioned above:

1. For we believe in God the Father, we deem that all man are made in the image of God, whatever belief they are attached to. God is the creator of all mankind. And thus we as the Church feel sent to commit ourselves to society, according to the rights of men and the integrity of creation. We advocate the weak, we respect the religious liberty of people belonging to other religions, we try to bring about peaiece and reconciliation within our society and we are actively engaged in preserving the environment. Even where our commitment is not aimed at winning new church members, ”mission“ is performed: In the name of the Father we feel sent to support a peaceful and equitable life of all people within the frame of a healthy environment. Thus we can inspire the confidence that we are not an institution of the past but a constantly relevant social factor. Our diaconal work, our commitment to a peaceful coexistence of the religions, to reconciliation between ”victims“ and “offenders“ from GDR times, and our eco-political work may demonstrate our efforts.

2. For we believe in Jesus Christ, we really can and want to testify our Christian faith and wish to pass it to everyone else. I would like to talk about the Sermon on the Mount and about Jesus’ cross and resurrection deeply strengthening my trusting in the Lord. I would like to testify that the Gospel about justification makes me feel free. And I am pleased with everyone who gets enthusiastic about the good news - such as I do. That is the ”mission“ in the name of Jesus Christ. In such a way we contribute to a revival of Christian tradition being a knowledge how to orientate ourselves. Our educational work, our youth ministry and a large percentage of our classic community work may again demonstrate our efforts.

3. For we believe in the Holy Spirit, we know that the spirit of God does not only blow within the church buildings. The spirit of reconciliation, of peace, of charity does also blow in the vicinity of people belonging to a different religion. That is why we are keenly looking for a dialogue with people having different beliefs, and why we are anxious where we could find analogies to our Christian understanding of God, man and world. That is the ”mission“ of the Holy Spirit enabling us to have interreligious talks with all sorts of people.

Well, it is my perception that we can be a ”missionary people’s church“ in very different life situations by means of this approach. I do not think of the ”peoples’s church“ as of a church comprising ”all people“ but, in the sense of the Barmen Declaration, Thesis VI[2], as of a church accomplishing its task of ”delivering the message of the free grace of God to all people“. We too will be able to be and to remain such a people’s church if we live and act within the people as a numerically restricted church.

VI. ”Salt of the Earth“ – the EKBO Programme of Reform

In order to come nearer to this goal the EKBO has developed a programme of reform in 2007: ”Salt of the Earth. The Perspective Programme of the EKBO“.

We are guided by the Word of Jesus:

> *You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:13-16).*

The image of the ”salt of the earth“ is a strong one. Jesus provocatively startles his disciples: They shall confidently live their faith. Pungent salt in a tasteless soup, bright light in bitter despair: That’s what they shall be.

This strong metaphor in Matthew 5 follows close upon the Beatitudes. Thus it reminds us of what imparts substance, strength and flavour to our faith - it is living in the sense of the Beatitudes: looking for peace and justice, exercising charity, bearing misery, for the sake of the kingdom of God. The Gospel according to Matthew introduces the Sermon on the Mount with the aim that we discover a new, universal horizon of hope that stretches over the wicked and threatened world like a rainbow. Christian faith is not only confined to the heart and the soul. Far from it, the substance of faith shall be dissolved to pervade the world and to confront desperation that threatens to befog the earth. We shall not hoard our salt for us for it will lose its benefit. We are called upon to participate actively in shaping the world, to meet its challenges, to ”dissolve“ ourselves through our commitment while ”flavouring“ the earth.

And all this does not happen in our own right but in the strength of Jesus Christ who had resurrected and tells us: ”You are the salt of the earth, the light of the world“, and who comfortingly encourages us at the same time: “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age“.

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[2] ”The Church’s commission, upon which its freedom is founded, consists in delivering the message of the free grace of God to all people in Christ’s stead, and therefore in the ministry of his own Word and work through sermon and sacrament. We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church in human arrogance could place the Word and work of the Lord in the service of any arbitrarily chosen desires, purposes, and plans.“

The programme of reform called ”Salt of the Earth“ assumes that we need the following approaches in a ”missionary people’s church“:

a. spiritual profiling instead of undirected activity
b. setting priorities instead of claiming completeness
c. mobility as to the forms instead of clinging to structures
d. outward orientation instead of self-sufficiency

At first ”Salt of the Earth“ analyses the strengths and weaknesses of our church. Our strengths are as follows: We still render steady and reliable services in the city and in the country. Our pivotal services are well known: Sunday service and religious ceremonies. The church does also have enough space for its services. The sacred spaces have a substantial integrating function. This applies also to non-church-members. Sacred music is a service which can appeal to outsiders and non-members as well.

Our weaknesses are as follows: Many services are determined by the needs and interests of the core congregation or they are characterised by congregational or rather church-based traditions. We do not have enough means for new services since accustomed activities are not abandoned. The church milieu is prone to restricting its sensation towards a few social groups. An inner circle defines how congregations are shaped. They tend to set their commitment as a benchmark. The idea is still conveyed that the congregation is a family living at the very same place for several generations. However, this does no longer apply even to the core congregation. The idea is still conveyed that all congregations have to offer the same basic services everywhere. The internal communication of the church is inefficient. Many people work in isolation. Congregational experience is not exchanged beyond parish boundaries.

What goals are to be pursued?

The basic goal of our church is to keep the membership figure stable. In view of the demographic development featuring a declining population it is a formidable challenge. This development will lead to an increasing percentage of Evangelical people in relation to the total population. In a break from present tradition the congregations have to orientate themselves towards their environment, that is to say to do missionary work in order to accomplish the goal mentioned above. The Church has to be increasingly noticed and experienced in public life. As previously mentioned it has to become a ”legible institution“. We have to intelligibly explain to outsiders what church life and Christian faith are about. This means, nevertheless, that we have to invest in an advanced vocational training of our staff in order that everyone working within the Church, whether male or female, will be able to comment plainly on their faith.

This programme had already been developed four years ago. What has become of it?

When I was appointed bishop of the EKBO in November 2009 I was very particularly told that the reform process showed some symptoms of fatigue. The ambitious aims

of the programme would not be achieved, motivation would decline. Subsequently, I had an evaluation carried out. The results are now available. The analysis of the survey demonstrates that the intention of ”Salt of the Earth“ is being supported and approved of by a vast majority. The general impression is that the perspective programme has not really been accepted by the congregations. After projects started to be realized in the sense of the programme problems have arisen - that’s what we were told by people being interviewed.

At the regional synod early in April of this year we elaborated a concept for the following years. It will introduce and supervise reasonable on-topic changes by starting specific and co-ordinated projects. Twelve individual projects will be initiated, including basic ones such as a training to improve goal orientation: First we have to learn to figure out collectively our true goals. Then do we have to reflect about where and how we shall take action. Only this way will we gain orientation and objectiveness.

I want to mention the individual projects below:

1. We want to conduct decentralised *advanced training*, 70 trainers becoming qualified to introduce goal-oriented working at all levels of the church.

2. We want to improve evaluation of the *visitations* being conducted at all levels of our church and we are looking for good ideas, successful projects and innovative approaches that can be utilized for the whole church. As a result an additional place of employment shall be established.

3. Starting in 2012 we will chose a sphere of church activity as a subject each year. The congregations might contribute to the subjects by providing assistance, by offering workshops and by presenting discussions. The first subject will be a sphere of activity called ”worship“.

4. Inviting people to congresses. The bishop and the church leadership will invite people to a congress every five years. This congress shall offer a market of innovations, an organized exchange of experience and plenty of stimulating inputs.

5. For some time now, we have been elaborating an advanced training concept for all staff. It demands us to compile requirement profiles for various professional fields and for honorary posts as well.

6. As a supplement to the projects mentioned above we are reforming the administration of our church: A new structure of the administration offices and a new accounting system are being introduced. A reorientation of the consistory (regional church administration) is taking place.

7. ”Adult Faith“. This year all regional churches will run a project called ”Adult Faith“. A kind of ”confirmation classes for adults“ will be offered as an opportunity to religious instruction. Since all religious courses in Germany have been introduced by the western regional churches we have to investigate what kind of religious instruction would be suitable for people living in an environment determined by atheism.

8. Youth ministry. On the level of the church districts a needs assessment shall be prepared along with a task review of the services offered. Subsequently an individual concept shall be drafted in every church district in order to network different services offered for children and juveniles within religion class at school, confirmation class, extra-school youth ministry and activities offered to children.

9. Minor Christian communities. We want to discover and accompany the spiritual communities already existing within our church. Twelve pilot communities are to be found. Thus we are aware of the fact that new forms of spiritual life will have to be developed in the future.

10. Rural Evangelical congregations in the social environment. We want to find seven congregations acting within the social environment of rural areas in a successful manner: for example by co-operating with municipal authorities, with local associations, with community facilities.

11. Protestant social service and local congregation. We want to find three congregations connecting professional social service with congregational life in a special manner.

12. Religion in the social environment and in society. We want to discover and network those congregations having developed projects to promote the coexistence of different religions in their social environment.

VII. Conclusion

I have attempted to show you the state of affairs of our church that has to perform its mission in a very inhomogeneous social situation. We know both post-Christian and traditionally Christian milieus, both atheistic and newly arising religious milieus. If nothing else, we trustfully hope for originating and encouraging new milieus determined by Christian ideas.

I did not put emphasis on a baptism theology but on an ecclesiastical approach. I told you about the efforts to reform our church and I illustrated our goal to become a ”missionary people’s church“ significantly stronger than before. We in the EKBO comprehend the Great Commission of Jesus as being embedded in an *integrated* ecclesiology. It is His commission written in golden letters at the front of our Berlin Mission vintage brick building I read every morning as a legacy and as an obligation when arriving at the Evangelical Centre in Friedrichshain to start my work in the bishop’s office.

”Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.“

Thank you for your attention.