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CLAUDIA WÄHRISCH-OBLAU

Mission in Reverse: Whose Image in the Mirror?

The Christian presence in Germany is now much more than the established Lutheran or reformed churches. Claudia Währisch-Oblau introduces us to some of the neo-Pentecostal churches of immigrants, and tells of ways in which they are growing together in mission. The challenges faced by both sides include learning of each other's culture, and coming to appreciate their differences as adding to the witness of the body of Christ, not taking away from it.

The Reverse Mission Movement

The African pastors were sitting down with the general secretary of the Association for Missionary Services, a large umbrella organization for churches and groups in Germany who are involved in evangelism. 'Can't you see that we are like manna from heaven?', one of the African pastors asked the German. 'God has sent us here to help you evangelize Germany. Why don't you make use of us?'

The young Korean German woman came to see me at my office. She had been born and brought up in Germany, but then gone back to Korea for a while. There, she had married a young theological graduate. Now she has returned to Germany with him and he was invited to serve as pastor of a Korean congregation in Essen. 'We have to break out of our isolation,' she said about her congregation. 'We know that we have a calling to reach out and witness to the Gospel, not just to Koreans, but also to Germans.' So she came to offer German churches their help: 'We have a good choir – we could go into old people's homes and other places to sing. We also have several retired nurses who are still fit and would like to volunteer their services where they would be needed.'

These are just two examples of the reverse mission movement that has been reaching Germany from both African and Asian countries. African and Asian missionaries are coming to Germany in ever-growing numbers, preaching the Gospel and establishing churches. They weren't invited by the German churches. Neither did they ask for the German churches' permission to start their work here. They did not feel the need for this. They have been called by the Holy Spirit to do this work, and that is enough.

For a long time, this mission movement was not noticed by the German churches. After all, the evangelism work of the immigrant pastors and evangelists was not very visible. Mostly, they gathered congregations of their own nationality

and language background, perhaps with the odd one or two German members. Only very recently have German churches started to take notice. In May this year, the United Evangelical Mission organized a conference under the theme 'From reverse mission to common mission' in which it brought together missionaries from Africa and Asia and church workers from Germany who wanted to explore ways of doing mission together.

But many German churches remain very critical of the reverse missionary movement. Rather than receiving it as a godsend, they react with dismay. The reason for this can be plain racism ('Why should our country be evangelized by blacks?') as well as theological rejection ('Why should we be evangelized by Pentecostals?'). Difficulties also arise from the very different concepts about what the mission of the church is, and how evangelism should be conducted – or whether it is needed at all!

Mission in Unity?

How is mission in unity possible in such a situation? I believe that a practical approach is needed first, and that theological dialogue should follow practical co-operation rather than precede it. Black Pentecostal and White mainline churches have fundamentally different ways of doing theology and fundamentally different hermeneutical paradigms. Dialogue without common praxis will just lead to misunderstanding. But where common experiences are the basis of theological dialogue, new insights can be won. Some German churches have started out on this difficult path. Here are two examples from the Ruhr area in Western Germany.

The Weigle-Haus in Essen

The blue and white square building sitting between the highway and the railway tracks doesn't look like a church at all. But the Weigle-Haus in Essen, named after its founding pastor, is a church, albeit a rather unusual one. Founded as an inner city youth ministry more than 100 years ago, it has long since developed into a congregation of sorts, or, in the words of its current pastor: 'into one church with four congregations.' First, there was the 'normal' Sunday morning congregation, consisting mostly of young adults and older people. Then there is the youth congregation that meets on Sunday nights. A few years ago, an African congregation asked for rooms at the Weigle-Haus. It was not just given a place; it has become part of the whole setup. And when the German pastor learned that a Tamil congregation was coming into existence, he specifically invited it to meet at the Weigle-Haus, too.

There was a reason for this: the Weigle-Haus has long been active in both social and evangelistic outreach to young people in Essen's inner city. Many of the youth living in the vicinity of the church are the children of Tamil refugees who have sought asylum in Germany. To help them cope with their schoolwork and improve their language abilities, the Weigle-Haus set up an after-school program. Children and youth can do their homework at the church under supervision and get help if needed. But the church also wanted to reach out to the parents – and failed, as most Tamil refugees speak little or no German. Now, the Tamil congregation has taken over the outreach to the Tamil parents: no more language problems!

The co-operation of the four congregations at the Weigle-Haus is quite unusual. After all, the German congregations are mainline evangelical (if with a strong evangelistic impulse), while both the African and the Tamil congregations are neo-Pentecostal. The differences in theology and style are acknowledged and talked about on all levels. This way, understanding slowly grows while each church keeps its characteristics. Occasionally, all four congregations celebrate a joint worship service. All congregations love them and would like to have them on a regular basis, but the pastors and church workers are not quite ready for this yet: 'Such services just take too much time to plan and prepare', sighs one German church worker who nevertheless admits that she loves the intercultural contact with the Africans and the Tamils.

This summer, a black church worker from the African congregation, who is currently undergoing theological training at a seminary in Belgium, did a month-long internship at the Weigle-Haus. Together with the church's full-time street worker, he established contacts with immigrant children and youth hanging out on street corners and game parlours. When he suggested running a drumming workshop, the response was enthusiastic. Street kids who had never responded to the German street worker came in droves and just loved every minute of the sessions. Now, the Weigle-Haus is thinking of establishing a longer-term 'united in mission team' of immigrant and German street workers for this kind of outreach.

The Markuskirche in Oberhausen

The evangelical churches in Oberhausen have long had partnership relations with churches in South Africa and Tanzania. Within the whole region, they are known for their tireless anti-racism work and their long-term support for the Program to Combat Racism of the WCC. Therefore, when African congregations started to come into existence in the early 1990s, the churches in Oberhausen opened their buildings and their hearts.

Markuskirche is one of them. Within the congregation, an interest for Africa has long existed. The congregation even has its own marimba group, consisting of Germans of all ages. So when Victory Christians Ministries, a church of mainly Nigerian refugees, asked for a room to meet, they were given a warm welcome. The Nigerians use the church for their worship services on Sunday afternoons, for their revivals and for their monthly night prayers. Their other activities take place at one of the two church centers, where there is always room for a Bible or prayer group or a committee meeting. Even a small office was found within one church centre which the Nigerian pastor has been using.

While both congregations remain independent – after all, the Germans are mainline Protestant and the Nigerians neo-Pentecostal – there is sense that they are growing together. Joint Sunday services take place regularly: when they feature the German marimba group, the church is really rocking! There are joint festivals, meals and even soccer games.

Both the black and the white church are very active in local anti-racism work. Just recently, they jointly participated in the organization of a big rally at the Oberhausen city center. But their common mission doesn't just end with political

statements. When a woman from the black congregation was, together with her three small children, threatened by deportation, the churches jointly organized a church asylum which has now already lasted five months.

Common life, common work

Both of these examples have in common that churches started out doing something together. This way, trust and community were built up before difficult theological issues were tackled. But this approach also needs a lot of tolerance on both sides, and the willingness to accept the other church as a sister church, a member in the body of Christ, even if it expresses its faith in a totally foreign way. The mainline churches had to realize that Pentecostals aren't a sect, even if they drive out demons during their night prayers. Conversely, the Pentecostal churches had to learn that mainline churches are not necessarily dead, even if nobody there speaks in tongues. Such tolerance also means that both churches abstain from crude attempts to 'convert' the other church to its own theology and practices while at the same time they acknowledge that their contact and co-operation will eventually change them both in ways they may not foresee yet.

Such tolerance is no liberal *laissez-faire*. It is based on the knowledge that it is Jesus Christ himself who builds his church through the work of the Holy Spirit. It is formed by the understanding that each church is a *corpus mixtum*, that each falls short of its calling in certain ways, but that the Spirit nevertheless works in them in unexpected ways.

Identifying the stumbling blocks to Unity

To come back to the scene at the beginning. When the African pastors offered their help in evangelizing Germany, the German pastor did not know how to react. There are multiple stumbling blocks to a mission in unity between immigrant and indigenous churches. To name just a few:

- The German *Landeskirchen*, the former state churches, are still strongly influenced by an understanding that they are *the* church in Germany. They define what a church should look like and how it should work. (This attitude has, until quite recently, also made life difficult for the so-called 'free churches', like Baptists or Methodists which are small minority churches in Germany where about 90% of all Christians are still members of the main Catholic or Protestant Church.) As former state churches and present 'people's churches' (*Volkskirchen*), they have actually become ethnic German churches that are only now beginning to realize that the Germany is becoming more multicultural, and that a people's church should reflect this. This coincides with the fact that German society as well as its political bodies have, until very recently, denied the fact that Germany is an immigration country. Hence, to be able to embark on a mission in unity with immigrant churches, the German *Landeskirchen* have to realize their own relativity. This is not easy at a time when the churches are undergoing a deep financial crisis and struggling with dwindling membership numbers.

- Racism is structurally inherent in German society, and the churches are not free of it. Of course, any accusation of racism is immediately denied by the churches. Nevertheless, immigrant Christians often face it in their contact with German congregations: While Korean churches usually have little difficulty in renting church facilities for their own services, African or Tamil congregations often find all doors closed in their faces. German church workers worry about noise, dirt, and generally seem to distrust people with darker skin.
- Anti-free church prejudice is a big problem. German churches have a hard time understanding why the African church using their rooms has no 'mother church' in Ghana that one could get in contact with. A church that does not belong to a denomination that is organized along institutional patterns can only be a sect. There is generally very little knowledge and understanding of non-mainline churches, their organization and their theology.
- Anti-Pentecostal prejudice adds to this. Especially among the theologically trained, there seems to be an almost neurotic fear of emotions in a worship service. 'Strange manifestations' of the Holy Spirit, trances, speaking in tongues etc. are usually perceived as induced by manipulation and rejected without any closer understanding. At the same time, Pentecostal pastors are assumed to be without any 'proper' theological training, and therefore not taken seriously. Hence, while an African choir might be invited occasionally to add some colour to a special German Sunday service – but is then only allowed to sing two songs! – there is very little willingness to let an African Pentecostal pastor preach.

Such stumbling blocks to mission in unity do not only exist on the German side. They can also be found within the immigrant churches. Among them are:

- Lack of German language ability. This is a big problem especially for immigrant pastors. While their congregation members usually learn at least some German once they have found a job, the pastors' work is usually confined to his own constituency, meaning that there are few chances to pick up German. Formal language courses are expensive and take a lot of time. And English-speaking immigrants realize that many Germans understand and speak English well enough, so there is less need for them to learn the language than, for example for French or Korean speaking immigrants.
- Lack of understanding of the German churches and society. Mission needs contextualization, and that means that immigrant missionaries need to learn and understand about the context in which they operate. Co-operation in mission is difficult if there is little knowledge of the situation in which one operates.
- Anti-mainline prejudice. Many Pentecostals fear co-operation with mainline churches because they are afraid that they will be controlled (this fear is not totally unreasonable!). They perceive mainline churches as more or less dead – how can they have the Holy Spirit if there are no manifestations of that? – and individual believers as lukewarm at best. Many Pentecostal immigrant Christians are afraid that the power of the Spirit they see manifested in their

own church will weaken if they adapt even a little bit to the ways of a mainline church. They sometimes antagonize German churches with crass attempts at 'converting' them to the 'true faith'.

- Competition and antagonism among immigrant churches and church leaders. Often, unity even among immigrant churches of a shared background and culture remains elusive as individuals set up new churches and 'steal' members from existing congregations. Churches and church leaders who feel threatened by such competition are usually not open to co-operation, especially as closer contact with German churches can, in the case of conflict with other immigrant churches or church leaders, lead to rumours about how that particular church or leader have been 'bought' by the Germans.

It is clear that to achieve mission in unity among immigrant and indigenous churches in Germany, these stumbling blocks need to be rolled away one by one. It is also clear that this is far from easy, and cannot be done quickly.

Confidence building

This is where the 'Program for Co-operation Between German and Immigrant Congregations' comes in. It was set up by the United Evangelical Mission in 1998 for its German region (which encompasses, roughly, the German states of NordRein-Westphalia and Hesse as well as some parts of Lower Saxony, Rhineland-Palatinate and the Saar area). Its first step was a period of research about the presence of immigrant churches, the second step some publicity work about the reverse missionary movement to Germany. Now, the groundwork has been done to move a step further.

Within the program, we have started to create opportunities for immigrant and German pastors and church workers to meet, to listen to each other and to learn from each other. Seminars and study days are being prepared by an international, open working group which also identifies the topics that need to be treated. Seminars that were held recently or are being planned include topics such as 'Reading the Bible through the eyes of another',¹ 'The Holy Spirit and the Pentecostal movement', 'Evangelism in Germany' or 'Overcoming Racism within the church'. In these seminars, we have started to develop a culture of speaking from one's own experience without assuming that one's own view must be shared by all, of listening very carefully to try and understand what the other is saying, and of going back to the Biblical text. After all, the Bible is the one thing we really have in common – it makes a good basis to develop contact, co-operation, community and, in the end, unity.

In each program, we follow a similar format to those churches which have already started on co-operation. We find that co-operation is easier if there is a concrete, limited project in view, and trust grows where concrete projects are put into effect together. The Pentecostal/mainline team of six people who prepared

1 Actually, this particular title sounded rather off-putting to Pentecostals. The Bible has to be read with spiritual eyes, and there *are* no others. Pentecostal participation in this seminar was therefore almost non-existent.

the seminar on the Holy Spirit and the Pentecostal movement started off with a session where everybody was trying to convince everybody else that they were reading the Bible in the wrong way. Only after the plan for a seminar seemed totally in tatters the group pulled together again, spent a whole day in intensive discussion, and came up with a timetable and a curriculum for the seminar which was highly appreciated by both mainline and Pentecostal Christians present. But without preparing the seminar together, the discussion within the preparatory group might well have led to so much friction that no understanding would have come out of it.

Mission in unity – coming together as the colorful, multicultural body of Christ in Germany – this is the vision that is shared by a slowly growing number of Christians in both indigenous German and immigrant churches. Many steps will still be necessary until this vision becomes reality. But as the Chinese proverb says: 'Even a journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step.' We have started on our way together.

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