



*“For the word of God is living and powerful and sharper than any double-edged sword, piercing even to the point of dividing soul from spirit, and joints from marrow; it is able to judge the desires and thoughts of the heart. “*

*(Hebrews 4:12)*

**REPORT  
ON THE IMPORTANT OCCURRENCES  
FOR THE CHURCH**

at the Regional Church Synod  
according to Article 139 of the Order of the Church  
given by

Präses Nikolaus Schneider

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## **Report of the Präses on the important occurrences for the church**

Respected Synod,  
Honourable Guests,  
Dear Sisters and Brothers!

The key text of this report is the Bible verse from the Letter to the Hebrews, from which the motto for the 31<sup>st</sup> German Evangelical Kirchentag in Cologne is taken:

*“For the word of God is **living and powerful and sharper** than any double-edged sword, piercing even to the point of dividing soul from spirit, and joints from marrow; it is able to judge the desires and thoughts of the heart. “*  
(Hebrews 4:12)

“Living and powerful and sharper” – that is the motto that will dominate the days of the Kirchentag and that invites people to come and take part in the Kirchentag “in our area” here in Cologne.

On your places you will find a report by our pastor responsible for the Kirchentag, Pfarrer Joachim Lenz on the progress of the preparations and information on the content of the main Rhenish projects.

The signs are good for a great festival of faith in Cologne.

Whether the Kirchentag will also be a success for us in the Rhineland depends most of all on as many congregations, groups and individuals as possible from our church taking part and getting involved. We have a great share in the preparations and in the form that the Kirchentag in Cologne will take. But only if we take part in large numbers and discuss together, pray together and celebrate together will it have a sustainable impact on our congregations. The huge commitment of personnel, ideas, time and money should also be worthwhile for our Rhenish church! I emphasise this, for of course it is also a good thing and honourable if we are just good hosts for our Kirchentag guests who come from elsewhere.

Our “Kirchentag Sunday” on January 21 is a special opportunity for inviting congregation groups and individuals to get into the mood and the topic in this Kirchentag year. Preparation material has been sent out already to all congregations and all preachers. The blue drums that will have arrived in your church districts while you are here at the Synod can be used as an anchor for inviting and winning events beforehand in spring. Fill them with water from your home rivers or streams and let the whole of the Rhineland flow together to the Kirchentag in Cologne!

“Living and powerful and sharper” – a thought-provoking, stimulating and inspiring Kirchentag motto.

No imperative this time, that calls upon us directly to act justly in a way that is pleasing to God.

No nouns this time that describe and promise direct fruits of our faith.

The motto of the coming Kirchentag in Cologne is a word of God that makes itself the subject, that both questions and challenges us, our thinking, speaking, believing and acting.

It is a word of God that makes clear:

God's grace is no cheap grace.

God's word hits people and affects people not just as a comforting promise that gives new courage.

God's word hits and affects people also always as a watchful, discriminating, cutting and judging authority.

The day of God is both judgement day and the day of salvation, that was and is the message of the Old Testament prophets.

Our righteousness before God, our earthly and heavenly salvation includes recognition of our failings, repentance and readiness to change our ways, forgiveness and a new beginning.

That was and is the message of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And this message of the Word of God that judges and uplifts, does not only apply to the thinking, speaking and acting of individual Christians, but also to the statements of our church and even her structures.

The Leuenberg Church Fellowship describes it in this way: "The church is founded in the Word of the triune God. She is the creation of the Word that calls to faith, through which God reconciles and binds his people, who have become estranged from him and contradict him, by justifying them and making them holy in Christ, renewing them in the Holy Spirit and calling them to be his people". In this way the church is the creation of the Word of God ("creatura verbi divini").

The Word of God also divides and separates within our church and for our church with truth, truthfulness and life accompanied and blessed by God on the one side and error, lies, malice and deathly alienation from God on the other side.

The important occurrences for our church must be measured and answered for to the living Word of God, Jesus Christ.

The planning, structuring, decision taking and future action of our church must be directed towards the Living Word of God, Jesus Christ.

May God's Spirit make us the gift of Her presence and the perception of the living Word of God in all the necessary encounters and discussions that we face.

## I. Faith and Theology

Jesus Christ says: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me, will never die." (John 11, 25)

The word of God is alive, because God himself is a God of the living and not of the dead. God is creator, preserver and redeemer and has nothing in common with worthless idols. The word of the living God comes to us not as information, but happens in our midst: it speaks to us and calls upon us to decide.

The word of God is alive and makes us alive, our theological thinking and speaking, our faith, our congregations and our church.

Even if we feel it to be a strain – changes, controversial debates, even conflict and reconciliation are signs of being alive.

God's word remains in eternity, that is true. But God's word is not written down dogmatically in timeless eternal truths.

The spirit of God moves us and empowers us to find new words, new forms, and new ways of witnessing to the living word of God, of making the word of God come alive for others in our time and in our place.

In our Rhenish Church we must continually strive to see what God's love and righteousness can mean for our visions, for our structures and our offices - for the proclamation of the Gospel.

In this context however we must also take into consideration the prevailing conditions under which our church is working, not least of all the demographic change, the loss of members this brings and the corresponding loss of church funding that is to be expected. Here a word on our own behalf.

The explosive nature of the demographic change at all levels has so far not been taken seriously enough in the Federal Republic of Germany. This is also the case as far as planning in our church is concerned. So far planning has been geared towards what we have experienced and has included an expected reduction in the number of pastor's positions. For a long time this seemed to be a good way forward.

It is only in the last few years that we have begun to include things we have learnt from demographic calculations into our plans for the new generation of young theologians. This together with the church leadership's lack of knowledge of the congregations' and church districts' plans for pastor's positions, has led to the present situation, which causes considerable hardship for many of our young theologians and has led to disappointment and even bitterness. We must admit this openly and we must stand to it.

Therefore it is imperative that we now take action. The first suggestions for far-reaching decisions to improve our planning instruments and to offer future perspectives for our new generation of young theologians will be presented to you at this synod.

## **1. Reflections on the vision of being a “mission-oriented people’s church”**

On August 24, 2006 a hearing took place in the Wuppertal theological centre on the concept of a “mission-oriented people’s church”, which had been prepared and was run by the Office for Parish Development and Missionary Services (GMD) forming a network or “a working group for a missionary church”.

Answers to eight key questions in the context of this concept were worked on, presented and discussed. The results of these discussions and the short papers presented by Pastor Hans Hermann Pompe, Professor Doctor Eberhard Hauschildt, Superintendent Pastor Doctor Markus Dröge and a keynote address by Klaus Teschner are available as documentation. This can encourage our congregations to develop a vision for themselves either in agreement with this or by disassociating themselves from it.

I would like to present five in my opinion far-reaching considerations taken from the documentation:

1. The way to a “mission-oriented people’s church” is through the development of a ‘church spirituality’, a church piety. It is not formal or institutional changes that will lead to our goal, but rather a spiritual knowledge of being sent, in connection with openness toward new people and new groups of people.
2. If the “Diakonie” is ‘an expression of the life and being of our church’, then it should be possible to experience the spiritual “being” of our church in its diaconal activity. People, who receive help must be able to feel that here Christians are involved, because the Holy Spirit motivates them, gives them orientation and empowers them.
3. An essential Protestant characteristic of passing on our faith is its orientation to the Bible.
4. Mission saves the people’s church from vagueness – the people’s church saves mission from narrowness and a loss of reality.
5. ‘Mission-oriented people’s church’ is a church, that consciously takes on responsibility for society, i.e. is “church for others” in the sense of Bonhoeffer.

## **2. Reflections on ordination and office**

For more than 65 years competent and appropriately trained congregation members have been ordained to serve in word and sacrament within our regional church, even without an academic theology degree. Since 1950 our church has had an ordered procedure for the choice of such people and their training with regulations and church laws.

In September 2006, the Chairman of the EKD Council once again spoke out publicly against an ordination of so-called “lay people”. Ordination should remain limited to people who “put their lives in the service of the proclamation

of the gospel and the celebration of the sacraments". To do this requires a full theological training.

The Bishops' Conference of the VELKD takes a similar stand in their recommendations published in November 2006, "Called According to the Order of the Church". They understand the **ordination** of pastors on the one hand and the **commissioining** of Lay Readers on the other hand as two forms of the *one* office of public proclamation according to the Augsburg confession. Article 14 of this document states: "On the office of the church: on the office of the church they teach that no one should teach publicly in the church or celebrate the sacraments without having been called to do so according to the ordered procedure of the church." (Rudolph Mau Evangelische Bekenntnisse, Part I Volume 1 Bielefeld 1997, page 44)

Both forms require an "ordered calling", however they are different through the different size of the task and different demands in the training (page 17f). The difference according to the leading bishop Dr Johannes Friedrich in his foreword (page IV) is "purely terminological".

This difference between ordination and commissioining may help pragmatically to prevent "the understanding of a pastor's ordination threatening to become unclear". This fear should everyone be ordained who exercises the office of proclamation, is often expressed by pastors and is taken up here by Bishop Dr Friedrich.

But in spite of all purely terminological limitations, the Augsburg Confession CA XIV does *not* differentiate in "the church office" between different forms of service of word and sacrament.

Even within the VELKD the position of the bishops is controversial. After all even the Chairperson of the VELKD Theological Committee votes in a dissenting note for a common ordination with different approaches to public proclamation of the word and administration of the sacraments corresponding to our practice.

An academic theology degree and pastor's office were not named as conditions for ordination by the Reformers.

"And so that I state it even more clearly: if a small group of pious lay Christians were to be called and put out in the desert, who did not have a priest ordained by a bishop with them, and were they all to agree to it and choose one from among them, whether he was married or not, and give him the office: to baptise, to hold the mass, to absolve from sin and to preach, he would truly be a priest, as though he had been ordained by all the bishops and popes" (Martin Luther To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, 1520).

Besides, our church is not the only church to follow this line in the question of ordination. Other member churches of the EKD such as the Evangelical Reformed Church, the Church of the Province of Saxony or the Pomeranian Evangelical Church also ordain members of the congregation without an academic theology degree and without pastor's office.

The Rhenish ruling can also refer back to a decision of the Tenth Synod of the Confessing Church of the Old Prussian Union in November 1941 in Hamburg-

Hamm, which made it possible to ordain suitable members of the congregation, unfortunately at that time only male members.

In spite of all the critics who aim for an exclusive pastor's office, we shall continue with the ordination practice that has been practised for more than 65 years in our church for good theological reasons: an academic theology degree is not the exclusive condition for ordination, but rather the established suitability of the person, their trained theological competence and their commissioning by the congregation.

The objections to the ordination of voluntarily and professionally working staff are far less based on theological reasons and far more on the fear of the cutting back of pastors' positions and their being pushed aside; for the current restructuring process as a result of fewer funds being available, affects the number and size of pastors' positions just as it does those of other members of staff.

Examples can in fact be named, where pastor's positions were given up or reduced, and a part of the work so far done by the pastor was handed over to professional or voluntary workers with a different professional qualification. Such occurrences justify the fears expressed by the pastors.

We must put an end to this. For the ordained service of lay readers should not replace the ordained service of pastors, but be in addition to it!

I therefore request the pastors of our church to fulfil their sermon duties and administer the sacraments gladly and not to seek for any over-hasty "relief" from lay readers.

The professional service of academically trained theologians covers aspects and qualifications which are indispensable, which can never be covered by voluntary services alone. And the tasks listed under the 'divided office' according to our orders of the church must not be confused with the services done by lay readers.

The chance in the service of lay readers is precisely that it is *not* a professional qualification, but rather a personal qualification, and that it brings secular experience, professional experience and life experience into preaching, which enrich and extend the other services and offices in our church.

Misunderstandings may be caused by the insistence on ordination. In the way it is formulated it aims at the practice of the pastor's office. In order to achieve the necessary clarity and for the sake of the meaning of ordination, it seems to me necessary to try to revise the way it is formulated, so that it no longer gives any cause for misunderstandings.

### 3. Reflections on the voluntary office

A particular expression of the life of our church in its orientation towards the Gospel is the large number of those who are prepared to get involved in a voluntary capacity in numerous fields of work. According to the latest statistics it covers 114,600 people.

Our church does a certain amount to honour this involvement and to further it – the brochure on the recognition of voluntary activity in the Evangelical Church of the Rhineland, which you will find on your tables, is an example of this. Furthermore the Church Council has decided to award a voluntary work prize in the Evangelical Church of the Rhineland in future.

This prize should on the one hand make well-known forms of voluntary work, but also particularly new forms and particularly creative and integrative forms of voluntary work and projects that further independence known to the public, so that they are further encouraged. The projects should encourage people to take on responsibility for themselves and in church and society. They should contribute to communicating and strengthening the faith and be appropriate to invite people to identify with their church.

I'm looking forward to being able to present the voluntary work prize in December this year for the first time.

### 4. Reflections on Holy Communion

As I announced in my last year's report, the theological committee has prepared a paper on Resolution 34 from the Synod 2004: "May the church exclude from the Lord's Supper?". The paper consists of three parts – a theological statement on the subject of "church discipline", a practical aid "Inviting to the Lord's Supper responsibly", and a summary of the doctrinal debate on Resolution 34.

I would also like to summarize – not in detail, but rather in a few main points: In spite of good recognizable reasons for the procedure that led to Resolution 34 being passed, leaving the discussion in presbyteries and district synods to follow after the synod resolution, we should nevertheless follow the accepted order, especially when dealing with central themes and questions, and only discuss and pass resolutions in the Regional Church Synod after the subject has been discussed in congregations and Church Districts.

That the dogmatic discussion decided on in 2004 would be unbiased was not thought possible by many people outside our regional church. We have shown that corrections and more precise wording are possible, but also the re-confirmation of our Synod resolutions.

I would like to underline the basic insight of our resolution, that the invitation to the Lord's Supper is **unconditional**. However it is not **without pre-conditions**, nor is it **without consequences**. Pre-conditions are baptism and the desire to receive Holy Communion founded in a person's own faith.

The celebration of the Lord's supper is not without consequences for it encourages people to direct their lives anew and leads into the communion of the faithful or rather strengthens this community.

When the church celebrates the Lord's Supper, she must take care that Jesus Christ remains the subject of what is happening, and not the church herself. If "the place of the host is not occupied" that does not mean that the host is absent. It concerns the real presence of the Lord, whose presence is however not at our command. It is promised, it is certain, but it cannot be forced or ensured. The "Lord's Supper" is also "the Church's Supper", but in such a way that the church does not act on its own strength, but rather lets her actions be determined by the Host, who creates space for himself.

I maintain that participation in the Lord's Supper is no **right** of membership, so that people may be "allowed to take part" or "excluded", but may only be "invited". This seems to me to be the key point in the statements of our resolution on Holy Communion.

The agreement of all those taking part in the doctrinal discussions that the church must in certain situations also say no to the teaching and behaviour of Christians, I also agree with. Church discipline is necessary, in order to maintain the claim of the gospel that the word of God and God's commandments be taken seriously in the lives of individual people and in the congregation; the exclusion from Holy Communion however is not a suitable means of church discipline.

Our debate on the Lord's Supper will continue. This meal goes with us throughout our lives – liberating us, strengthening us, reassuring us, giving us pleasure and promoting a sense of community – as it has accompanied the church throughout her history. The fact that our resolution has provoked a discussion way beyond the borders of our regional church, but also caused people within Rhenish presbyteries and district synods to think about the Lord's Supper, I see as an important and encouraging aspect of my summary.

## **5. Reflections on the Discussion Group on Science and Theology**

For many years the Discussion Group on Science and Theology founded by Präses Bayer has been meeting regularly. In this group, which meets in the Evangelical Academy in the Rhineland, basic questions of our view of the world and our conception of man are discussed that develop out of the interpretation of scientific insights. The discussion of the ethical challenges associated with new technologies is one such question.

Science, and following on from it, technology have changed our reality and also our view of the world dramatically. This is the case with both the positive aspects of development and the negative ones. We all share in these successes in that we use a multitude of technical appliances, make use of modern medicine and gadgets that make the daily tasks easier.

But as all human thinking and doing is “ambivalent”, the successes of technical progress are associated with stress and pollution for the whole of creation. This is the case with the threatening consequences of climate warming just as for the still unsolved questions of energy supplies for the future. The discussion group has just completed a three-year discussion process under the title: which reality do we live in? The discussions were in part very controversial, especially among the scientists. Behind the many intensive debates was the conviction of all participants that their insights also had to be understood and answered for in the light of their faith as Christians, and that theological reflection was absolutely essential when it came to interpreting reality.

Christian theology knows that the world is God’s creation, knows that we as humans are created in the image of God, and that it is from this basis that we have our unique dignity and responsibility. The consequences of this for the systematics of research and the way we deal with its results are however not self-explanatory, but must rather be continually readjusted in discourse with the sciences. The results of our discussions, which will shortly be published as a book, can make a contribution to this process.

## 6. Reflections on “The Bible in Just Language”

The “Bible in Just Language” was published in autumn 2006. For five years many theologians worked very hard to realize this ambitious project, accompanied by an advisory council under the chairmanship of the Church President of the Evangelical Church in Hesse and Nassau, Professor Dr. Peter Steinacker, in an intense exchange of ideas with each other and with the participation of very many and very different people.

This translation is committed to justice in many aspects:

1. The translators are very concerned about **text justice** towards the original text and therefore include a glossary to enlighten people on the fundamental understanding and translation possibilities for central biblical concepts in the Greek and Hebrew languages
2. The translation is concerned with **gender justice**. It wants to make clear that women were part of what the Bible describes and how they were involved. And it does not just want to “imply” that women were there, but to explicitly address them.
3. The translation is concerned for **justice with regard to the Christian-Jewish dialogue** and attempts to do without anti-Jewish interpretations in the translation.
4. A further focus of the project was to focus on **social justice**. In the tradition of Luther, who made his contemporaries understand the Bible through the terminology of the medieval structure of society, the new

translation explains present-day social realities in times of a globalised world.

This translation extends the spectrum of Biblical books in the German language. It would be a misunderstanding to presume that the “Bible in Just Language” makes a claim to replace familiar texts such as those from the Luther Bible. Nor does it aim to become used as a basic text in the liturgy. It sees itself far more as a chance through the use of unexpected language to discover surprising new aspects and to question popular patterns of thought and language. It wishes to make a contribution towards the perception that the biblical texts witness to a long history between God and humankind, and to make people stronger today in their concern for justice.

During the process it became obvious that this new translation tempted women and men to read it and discuss it, who so far had hardly concerned themselves with the Bible at all.

In the last weeks and months we have seen signs of a lively and committed debate in the many comments on the new translation, some of them very sweeping, some much more specific.

With the required brevity I would like to comment on two fundamental points of criticism:

1. The Bible in Just Language is a “huge ideological project”, that obscures the “bright light of genuine criticism” through “a terrorist-like mania for justice” and repudiates the “acquired wisdom” of our own Protestant confession through historical-critical exegesis, according to the Feuilleton of the Süddeutsche Newspaper over the Christmas weekend 2006.

I consider this criticism to be wrong in its approach and exaggerated in its statements. The Bible in Just Language discloses its preconception and the interests of the translators, and in so doing makes a contribution to ideological criticism and also to the historical critical understanding of Bible texts, also including criticism of their own translation work.

2. The use of many different names and expressions for God – such as: the One, the Name, the Living One, I-am-with-you, Schechina, the Eternal, the Holy – are in danger of destroying the personality of God and thereby of preventing people from developing a personal relationship to God.

I agree with this criticism. The Father-Son relationship to God that Jesus handed down to us is essential for my theological thinking and speaking. This applies also to my faith, which cannot do without the personal dimension in the understanding of God’s relationship to humankind according to Jesus example.

A justifiable concern has been taken too far; to overcome the century-old fixation of Christian theology on male views and images of God in connection with the use of the term “Lord” (Herr) as a form of address for God - a word unsuitable for differentiation.

The new translation is well suited for example for the preparation of a sermon or a bible study in connection with other translations or in comparison to the original texts.

## **7. Reflections on the use of “just language” in church services**

In December 1998 the Church Council resolved: “On account of discrimination through language the Committee for Worship Services and Church Music in cooperation with the Desk for worship services and the Desk for women’s concerns shall be commissioned to go beyond the new Service Order Book and make further suggestions for a just language for women in worship services and the liturgy. In this context liturgy modules shall be developed that also take the situation of women as victims of violence into consideration.”

The realisation of this task has required an - even by Rhenish standards – long time and has encompassed broad discussions and debate in the committees concerned.

It is thanks to feminist theology that we have been made sensitive to how we restrict, disregard and reduce God and the women attending our services with our male and patriarchal images and language patterns.

Our liturgical speaking about God and to God should also be such that we take up the fullness of the biblical tradition of forms of address and images of God, without giving up the personality of God as handed down to us, in favour of a diffuse and gender-neutral ‘spirit power’. The language we use in the liturgy should also speak explicitly to women and not just ‘include’ them in male language patterns.

We must therefore take up the theological and pastoral challenge in our worship services that encounters us on the one hand with the commandment, ‘You shall not make yourselves an image of God’, and on the other hand, the human need for support and security through familiar images and language patterns.

I am glad that we are at last able to present you at this synod with the leaflet, “Taken at your word – the use of just language in worship services”, and I hope that the leaflet offers you suggestions and assistance and that you find it stimulating.

## **8. Reflections on the dialogue with Islam**

Over the past few years new developments in our relationship to Islam have constantly forced us to think again. The misuse of Islam by violent Islamist groups, the discussion about Muslim teachers wearing a headscarf in school, the efforts being made to introduce religious instruction for Islam and the development of parallel societies as a result of the lack of integration are only some of the challenges facing our society and our church.

The caricature conflict used to mobilise a furious mob, and not less so the quite drastic reactions in part, linked to threats and even manslaughter, as a reaction to the Pope's lecture held in Regensburg, show clearly enough the great need for orientation and clarification on the subject of Islam here.

At church district level the synod representatives for Christian-Muslim Dialogue do good work for which I particularly thank them here.

The regional church working group on Christians and Muslims have given us important new insights in the past few years, for example on the question of praying together.

This is a subject that has been very much in the public eye in the past few weeks. The language use suggested by the EKD Council, that we reject 'inter-religious' prayer but accept 'multi-religious' prayer has not only been found difficult to understand by the secular public. I would like to offer a few clarifying comments.

The discussion whether and in how far not only Christians and Jews but also Muslims all pray together to the "same" God, I do not find helpful. Judaism, Christianity and Islam are all monotheistic religions. Therefore it cannot be a question of the same or several different Gods. It is far more a question as to whether the concepts of God and images of God of the three religions makes fellowship with each other in worship service and in prayer possible or prevents it.

And in the case of multi-religious or inter-religious celebrations and memorials it is a question of how much agreement we need about who and what God is for us, what God expects of humankind and what God does for humankind, in order to be able to pray with the same words or to be able to pray together.

Inter-religious means: praying the same prayers together;

Multi-religious means: being together and praying different prayers one after another in respect for each other.

Even if it is a little complicated, we should be able to differentiate between these two forms of spiritual celebrations and prayers and talk to others about the necessity of this differentiation.

Just as it is important not to be silent on different concepts of faith and theological insights nor to water them down, so it is also important for the sake of peace in our society that both religions name their common aims and at religious celebrations and special occasions publicly and recognisably do what is possible together. This is particularly the case in places and institutions where people of the Muslim faith and the Christian faith live closely together or learn or work together. This applies to kindergarten and schools as much as to companies and communities and particularly to memorial services after accidents or natural catastrophes.

I consider it both meaningful and possible in such situations to hold a spiritual celebration in which people of different faiths bring their common concerns

before God one after another, each in the form appropriate to their own convictions.

However there is also need for clarification in social and political questions. Here I would name for example the role of religion in the public life of a secular state under the rule of law, religious freedom and the choice of religion, religiously legitimated violence and the commitment to peace of the religions.

In such cases we will insist that after long years of bloody conflict on our continent the achievement of such good things as the separation of state and church, religious freedom and the renunciation of state force for the practice of religion will not be surrendered.

Furthermore practical problems of living together must be subjects of dialogue, for they can reach directly into the reality of each group; such things as gender roles and the chances and dangers involved in Christian–Muslim marriages.

In addition there are frequently repeated questions about the building of mosques, the use of church buildings by Muslims, the ritual slaughter of animals and the ways of dealing with illness, dying and death.

When discussing these subjects the respect for the faith of the other must include critical questions rather than excluding them. The willingness on both sides to face such questions is the test for a successful dialogue. For it is only where things that are unclear and unsure can be spoken about and possibly cleared up, so that understanding and as a result trust can begin to grow. To make our contribution to this and not to diminish our efforts is a permanent task for the Islam work of our regional church at all levels.

## **II. Ecumenical Affairs**

“Those who trust in the Lord for help will find their strength renewed. They will rise on wings like eagles; they will run and not get weary; they will walk and not grow weak.” (Isaiah 40, 31)

The word of God is powerful and gives us new strength. Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed, the smallest among all seeds, but which grows up to become a mighty tree that offers space for all the birds under heaven (Matthew 13, 31-33).

Unfortunately we often do not discover ourselves to be part of this picture in all our ecumenical relationships and efforts. Too often we experience in a depressing way that things which held the promise of great success only grow into very small plants. How often did we have to cut back our dreams, hopes and expectations? How often do we feel like giving up and retiring within our own narrow borders, the borders of our home congregations and home churches.

But God’s word promises us new strength, gives us wings, and allows us to recognise new growth. This also applies to discussions and structures of ecumenical relations that often seem to have come to a standstill.

## 1. Reflections on the key concept “Profile-based ecumenism”

This concept was introduced into the ecumenical debate by the Chairman of the EKD Council at his meeting with Pope Benedict XVI during the Catholic World Youth Congress in Cologne. In order to clarify what is meant by this, our church invited Bishop Prof Dr Wolfgang Huber and Bishop Prof Dr Dr Karl Cardinal Lehmann to a symposium in Düsseldorf on May 29 last year.

The term “profile-based ecumenism”, coined by Bishop Huber, aims to describe a clearer picture of the church based on the insights of the Reformation, both to help the self-understanding within the Protestant churches of the EKD and also for presentation to the general public.

I consider this important and necessary after a long period in which the Roman Catholic Church has publicly and doctrinally developed their own profile, from “Dominus Jesus” to the Pope’s visits in Germany, and after a period of time that has also been marked by self-secularisation of the Protestant churches.

For Bishop Huber it is not only a question of intellectual clarification but rather a case of a different attitude. “Profile-based ecumenism” should start a movement in our churches away from an attitude that calls our own identity into question and signals willingness to change at the first sign, towards one that declares: “Protestant for a good reason”!

Above all this wording signifies that differences will remain between the large Christian churches. It is therefore necessary to try to find a form of ecumenical unity that does not level out the differences, that enables respect and recognition on a par with each other; a unity in reconciled diversity.

Cardinal Lehmann obviously supports a different direction for the ecumenical debate than the one that Bishop Huber hopes for with his concept “profile-based ecumenism”. He advocates further ecumenical mobility and is in fear of people maintaining and adhering to their own positions. He particularly expects the leadership of the churches to continue to work at the difficult ecumenical issues between them, linking into what has been achieved with the declaration on justification, in order to overcome more of the existing differences. For him the question whether differences will remain is not a question at all.

The targets for ecumenical efforts that each of the speakers judged as realistic differ in my opinion quite fundamentally in one point:

Bishop Huber sees lasting differences and seeks for a visible but more **symbolic** unity.

Cardinal Lehmann sees differences being overcome and seeks for a visible and more **legal** unity.

After our experiences of dissociation through Dominus Jesus, Ecclesia de Eucharistia and the refusal of Eucharistic hospitality even in mixed denominational marriages, similarly to Bishop Huber, I do not estimate the possibilities of overcoming the essential differences that separate our churches as being very high at present. In order therefore to strengthen our

ability to talk ecumenically together on a par, it seems to me necessary to gain new clarity and assurance for ourselves as churches of the Reformation.

The discussion process started by the paper "Church of Liberation, Church of Freedom" (Kirche der Freiheit) from the EKD Council tends also in this direction. The Congress related to it, taking place in Wittenberg at the end of this month, is after all intended to introduce a reform decade ending in the 500-years-celebration of the Reformation in the year 2017.

In view of the problems just demonstrated it is important to say a word with reference to Taizé. In my report a year ago, looking back on the funeral service for Frere Roger Schutz, the founder of the Taizé community, held on August 23, 2005, I regretted the ecumenical imbalance shown there.

During the past year I have learnt that the brothers of the community have celebrated as a rule the Roman Catholic eucharist for many years, and hardly ever a Protestant communion service, as Taizé has special permission according to which the non-Catholic brothers are allowed to take part in the eucharist celebration. On the other hand the Catholic brothers are not permitted to take part in a Protestant communion service.

And in 1969 already, the brothers' council of Taizé passed a resolution which states, that "the brothers who come from the Reformation churches also declare their loyalty to the Pope."

For Frere Roger this was an expression of his conviction that the Reformation churches were only a provisional arrangement and had to ask themselves whether in face of the transformation of the Roman Catholic Church their independence could still be justified. At the same time he remained convinced that he wished to live in communion with the Pope without bending to the legal claims of Canon Law and without giving up his own identity as a Reformed pastor. Loyalty therefore did not mean for him subjection to the Primate of the Pope.

If we acknowledge the ecumenical reality of Taizé, it becomes even clearer just what a theologically difficult ecumenical balancing act is practised there. In spite of these difficulties we should on our part do everything to retain Taizé as an ecumenical vanguard, which should be supported and developed further. For the attraction and appeal of Taizé especially for young people has not decreased, and all the churches are very glad of the impetus that goes out from this place in Burgundy, even right into their hymn books.

## **2. Reflections on the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE)**

"From a theological consensus and a pulpit and communion fellowship (on the basis of the Leuenberg Agreement) a true fellowship in witness and service has grown among over a hundred churches throughout Europe. Yet the hermeneutic openness which has become possible through the concept of "fellowship" allows different understandings of it; from a minimalist understanding (the Agreement as a peace contract) through an instrumental

understanding (the Agreement as a framework for common action or for protection of the minority churches) and a denominational understanding (the Agreement as an Association of Protestant churches) right up to a maximal understanding of the fellowship as “a church”. This was what the present president of the CPCE, Prof. Elisabeth Parmentier, said at the beginning of her report at the 6<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe – Leuenberg Church Fellowship, from 12 to 18 September 2006 in Budapest. The final report of the General Assembly documents clearly that the vision of a synod fellowship as presented in Budapest in 1992 by Präses Beyer - that would take on an increasingly binding commitment to its regulations according to the measure of its theological agreement – has come a good way forward to becoming reality.

Stemming from the centre of a common worship life, deepened through doctrinal discussions on “the form and work of Protestant churches in a changing Europe”, a binding commitment has been achieved, which enables the President and the Council of the CPCE to make the voice of Protestants in Europe and beyond heard in a much more authoritative way.

The regional groups, among them the North-West group coordinated by the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland are called upon to put down roots for this binding fellowship in the daily life of the churches.

A contribution towards this can be the project study “Evangelising in a Protestant way” passed by the General Assembly, but also the continuing doctrinal discussions on “Office, Ordination and Episcopacy according to Protestant Understanding” and on “Scripture – Confession – Church”.

The doctrinal discussions that have been commissioned show that we have still a long way to go, in order not only to position ourselves clearly in the ecumenical ecclesiastical debate, but most of all to agree within the Protestant churches on the importance of denominational identity and the understanding of office and church leadership that goes with it. From this point of view a deep gulf still exists between the Lutheran churches, particularly in Scandinavia and the United and Reformed churches of Western, Southern and South-Eastern Europe whose position in the CPCE is articulated most clearly by the Protestant Church in the Netherlands and by our Church.

A closer cooperation is also recommended with Baptist congregations, after the dogmatic discussions with the European Baptist Federation on the subject of “the beginning of Christian life and the being of the church” have opened up a possibility for coming closer together in our understanding of baptism, which could make the dogmatic judgments of the Reformation null and void. This document has avoided focussing on the question of the priority of baptism or a decision for the faith and rather attempts “to order the various forms of baptism to various points within a common understanding of processes of Christian initiation.” (p. 50 no. 10). And in addition: “Even if most Baptists surely consider the baptism of infants as unfitting, they cannot expressly question its validity, and in these cases demand only a confession of faith that completes

the path of Christian initiation in order to be received into a Baptist congregation.” (p. 51 no. 11). Therefore not meaning recognition in the strictest sense, but acceptance!

This declaration seems to me to offer a workable basis also for our church for much further-reaching discussions with our Baptist partners.

### **3. Reflections on the World Council of Churches (WCC)**

The 9<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the WCC in Porto Alegre received very little attention from the media. This quiet process and the work done there free of conflicts under the prayer motto “God, in your grace transform the world” gave the impression of an “ecumenism on a quiet note”. After the conflicts concerning the working together with the Orthodox churches at the 8<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in Harare 1998, it was now a question of putting into practice the agreements reached by a special commission on their cooperation.

The understanding to hold either denominational or interdenominational services made sure the Orthodox churches could participate and at the same time made this visible. The decision-making process by means of a process of consensus also contributed to the forming of opinions, both in relation to the subjects treated as also to the contents of a meeting, allowed minority positions to be expressed and also divergent opinions to be noted down.

The times in which we fought for theological positions seems to be past. The former General Secretary Konrad Raiser describes the present day ecumenical movement as “a time of pilgrimages for all the people of God”, meaning an essentially spiritual process. One can also get the impression of an ecumenical movement at different speeds in different denominational trains, so that the importance of the denominational world associations is increasing – which I expressly regret!

Unfortunately the issues of baptism, communion and the office have not made any progress. The suggestions of the General Secretary Sam Kobia to agree to a common date for Easter for all churches and to officially recognise each others baptisms was not taken up.

Essential decisions were taken as far as the churches’ common service to the world is concerned: on the duty to protect, on terrorism, on fighting terrorism and on human rights, on the reform of the United Nations, on the abolition of atomic weapons, on economic justice. Concerning economic globalisation a paradigm shift has taken place; from globalisation in the interest of the powerful economic nations to an “alternative globalisation in the service of humankind and of the earth”. For the WCC this means additional work and tasks to keep together the churches of the South with their experience of oppression and exploitation and the churches of the North, who at least indirectly profit from globalisation.

From Porto Alegre the question came back to us whether or how the WCC can continue to be the privileged instrument for ecumenical encounter. In the coming years discussions will be required on how the churches and the church families can organise themselves appropriately on the way to more visible unity, and how they can use the WCC as a common structure, as a central institution and as their instrument. I stand strongly for a strengthening of the WCC and for overcoming the denominational consolidation among the churches of the Reformation.

#### **4. Reflections on the situation of our partner church, the United Church of Christ (UCC) in the USA**

Richard Bliese, missiologist from the USA has established that his country has been caught up in the fangs of secularism and a wide range of spirituality and has transformed itself from “a light of the people” back to a mission field. This is also what we hear from our partner church, the United Church of Christ. Whilst she and other large Protestant churches have diminished or lost millions of members, new religious movements, Pentecostals and Evangelical churches were able to grow in strength.

The UCC observes with concern a politically influenced climate of consumerism and patriotism in the USA. A Messianic imperialism has increased and the threat from terrorism is used as “a permanent excuse for global military hegemony and preventive actions – and so for a kingdom, that clothes itself in the Messianic white clothes of an American Christian justice”. (C. Keller, *God and Power*, Minneapolis 2004, p 37.105)

From a fundamentalist point of view the world today is living in the seventh and last section of its history, in which according to Revelation 16,16 it comes to the last battle – Armageddon – and Christ’s victory over Satan, over Evil. It is also this idea of finality, the final days, which gives talk of an “Axis of Evil” its supposed meaning and the “War on terror” a religious basis.

On the basis of these goals the American President has the Protestant majority behind him: around 90 per cent of the Evangelical born again Christians and the Pentecostals voted for him again in 2004.

In the intermediate elections of 2006 President Bush has been punished for his lack of success in Iraq. Now it will be demonstrated whether the basic colour of American foreign policy will change and the regulations of international conventions once again come into their own.

I will not become tired of demanding that the imprisonment of political prisoners in Guantanamo Bay and their abduction to secret prisons must be ended. I demand the recognition of the Geneva convention and the appropriate UN conventions against the justification and use of torture.

The erosion of valid national and international justice creates a climate that endangers democracy and makes multilateral cooperation more difficult. This is one of the constant subjects in encounters within the framework of our church communion between the UCC and the UEK. We are on the way together as churches who wish for justice, so that peace may come about. We are grateful to be able to continue to hear the voice of the UCC - under the most difficult possible conditions for them in their society – it is essential for us!

## **5. Reflections on the situation of our partner churches in Southern Africa**

The Bishop of our partner church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia (ELCRN) Dr Zephaniah Kameeta, encourages all the congregations of his church to get decisively involved in the fight against HIV/ AIDS. This includes the setting up of testing centres and counselling centres, the organisation of prevention through taking up the subject in schools and in the programmes of youth clubs, and calling upon the church congregations to accept those sick and their families by caring for them in their homes and giving them spiritual support. As the only Protestant church in Namibia ELCRN does not exclude the use of condoms for the prevention of HIV/ AIDS – nor does the Roman Catholic Church there!

For Bishop Kameeta prevention has also a social component. “We cannot fight against HIV/ AIDS if at the same time we do not fight against the structural poverty of the people”. For this reason, together with many non-government organisations in Namibia and with great support from the United Evangelical Mission, he is driving the BIG initiative forwards. BIG stands for Basic Income Grant and aims that every person in Namibia should receive a guaranteed 100 Namibia Dollars (around 10 to 11 Euro) every month, in order to be able to at least take care of what is absolutely essential for life. For it is still the case that many people in Namibia, especially children, have often nothing to eat for days on end. And people who live constantly in worry, lacking basic food and drinking water are not in a position to protect themselves effectively against HIV and AIDS.

Countless numbers of girls and women are sent into prostitution, in order to be able to secure the financing of basic essentials for their families at least in this way.

In order to support the fight against HIV/ AIDS in Namibia and South Africa, the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland, together with the two other Protestant regional churches in North Rhine Westphalia, founded the project “Church and Business together against HIV and AIDS” three years ago. The aim of our churches in doing this is to give sustainable aid to people in the region of the world most affected by AIDS.

A pilot phase was started in some German firms producing in South Africa, as well as on guest farms and lodges in Namibia. The well-planned activities of

trained staff members have led to an extraordinary good resonance: up to a hundred per cent of those employed were willing to accept advice, between 80 and 95 per cent took an AIDS test immediately and received the results on the same day.

The fight against AIDS will remain one of the greatest challenges facing our partner churches in the coming years. Our church will continue to support the work of our partners and to strengthen and extend their own initiatives. Please help us to make contact to further companies in our country who are involved in Southern Africa, so that together with our business people active in Southern Africa we can succeed in doing whatever is possible!

### **III. Church and society**

“Come here you blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom that has been prepared for you from the beginning of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me to drink, I was a stranger and you took me in...I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to see me.” (Matthew 25,34ff)

God’s word is sharper than any two-edged sword and is a judge of our thoughts and the meaning of our hearts ... and points us to the suffering people and those seeking for help in our world.

Jesus identifies himself with the least of our brothers and sisters, with the poor, the sick and the dying, the prisoners and those seeking asylum.

We will not gain salvation on account of our just works. God gives us forgiveness and reconciliation without us deserving it or doing anything for it – that is true.

But as those who have been given a gift by God, as an expression of our joy and thanks for our salvation we cannot pass by Christ in the least of our brothers and sisters.

Our salvation is founded in the saving act of God and proves itself as having reached its goal in healing actions, our healing actions for other people and for the situation of this world.

#### **1. Reflections on the family**

At this synod we will have plenty of opportunity to discuss the subject of the family from various aspects. I shall therefore limit myself here to just a few points.

The case of two-year-old Kevin in Bremen shocked the German Republic. Besides the obvious failure of the responsible authorities, it raised the question

of the relative rights of child protection, parents' rights and the definition of public care and education.

However we must be very careful not to set up a false antagonism between the rights of parents and the rights of children.

The UN children's rights convention from 1989 (!) names the welfare of children as that which must have priority, that must be taken into consideration and given priority in every case and in all political and legal decisions. Parent's rights are rights that derive from children's rights and must be treated as such. The recognition of the child as subject and responsible bearer of its own rights leads to an understanding of parent's rights that relates to the responsibility for the child and is not to be understood as a parent's right to the child.

Whoever wishes to give the family greater priority, must also tackle the role of the media.

The consumption of media by children and young people has reached such a distractive intensity, that it counteracts the attempts of parents and teachers to educate. Unfortunately parents and teachers are all too often not good role models. Academic examinations have shown us that there is a link between private media consumption and success or failure at school for example.

Furthermore human tragedies, such as the rampage of a young person in a school in Emstätten, raise the question whether brutal computer games can be considered as partly responsible for young people "flipping out", and if so, whether these must be forbidden.

However there is usually more than one cause for such behaviour, reality is much more complex. In cases such as Emstätten something has gone wrong at several levels. Video games glorifying violence, incredible social isolation and lack of love, lack of recognition and an apparent lack of perspective in life, all came together here. Whoever simply damns video games or the uncontrollable Internet, is making it too easy for themselves, but in practical terms parents and teachers must face the question of their media education and competence. At the same time it must also be considered, whether computer games that glorify violence and those that offer totally destructive violence as the only concept for life in the form of a game should be forbidden or put on an index list. Such measures alone will not help, but are necessary as part of a comprehensive strategy.

We as the Protestant church must understand it as our duty to make our contribution to supporting those responsible for education, and to contribute ourselves in helping to make young girls and boys into strong young people with a positive attitude to life and capable of making their own judgements.

## **2. Reflections on the youth penal system**

The torture and death of a young man in the youth prison Siegburg caused horror in the general public. The difficult financial situation of the public budget had not only led to an unacceptable cutting back of personnel, but above all has so limited the aims of prison sentences, such as therapy, training, resocialization and preparation for reintegration in favour of a different goal: security. No one would dispute that security must be an outstanding aim of the work in youth prisons; but focussing on this one aim without keeping the other aims named above in view during the time of the prison sentence is short-sighted.

However I must emphasize that not all the prisons should be looked at in the same way. Our staff working in the prisons as pastoral counsellors try very hard to open up new perspectives for those imprisoned. They report of very different working conditions.

The situation is particularly appalling when pastors' positions are cut back for purely financial reasons. As an example I name the situation in the youth prison in Wuppertal: Since May 3, 2005 one of the pastors' positions has been vacant. Constant requests for refinancing of the position from the Ministry of Justice and the Prison Office have been refused with reference to the financial situation of the state budget. The usual annual meeting at the beginning of December was deferred to next year at short notice by the Ministry, so that we are still waiting to have a chance to talk personally about this unacceptable situation. We will do all that is in our power to improve it.

## **3. Reflections on the regulations for Sundays and holidays**

“The Sabbath is for the sake of man and not man for the sake of the Sabbath.”  
(Matthew 2,27)

On November 16, 2006 the Parliament of North Rhine-Westphalia with the votes of the coalition of CDU and FDP passed a new Shop Opening-Hours Law. Basically it is a question of “six times 24 hours”, the complete liberalisation of opening hours in the shops on six days.

Sundays, Christmas holidays, three Advent Sundays, Easter Sunday, Pentecost Sunday, Good Friday, All Saints Sunday, All Souls Day and Remembrance Day. All remain protected on principle.

However the rules for exceptions to Sunday opening have been extended to such an extent that one must quite justly speak of a dangerous erosion of the guaranteed protection of Sundays and holidays by the law.

The Bishops and the Präses in North Rhine-Westphalia had presented their criticism of the draft legislation to the Members of Parliament in an open letter before the parliamentary debate. In one or two points certain rulings of the draft legislation were then changed or withdrawn. The state government had

given protection of Sunday a very high priority right from the beginning. We as churches recognise this quite clearly.

Those who suffer most from the new law are the people employed in stores – and here a majority of women, who face even more difficulties in combining family and work. In addition small businesses or small individual shops face massive pressure of competition.

In the new law for the liberalisation of opening hours in the shops I see a further attack of economic principles on people's lives.

People need common time and space in their lives, for their partnerships and families, for their circles of friends, voluntary work and hobbies and also not least to keep up their ties to the church.

Without any common rhythm of work and leisure time, of daily life and holiday time, it is very difficult to live and creatively enjoy relationships and links to God and to other people. Therefore it is important, right and essential that the constitution of the land of North Rhine-Westphalia emphasises:

“Sundays and state-recognised holidays are recognised as days to honour God for spiritual inspiration, physical relaxation and rest from work, and are protected by law.” (Article 25,1)

The constitution is thus concerned with the protection of religious and social rights.

There is no question for us as the church that the special protection of Sundays and holidays should be lifted partly for emergency services, in doctors' surgeries, hospitals, caring homes and police stations. This also applies to technical plants that demand a continuous production process. However it is more problematic to draw a theological and ethical line between the Sunday opening of cinemas, theatres, restaurants and petrol stations as against a Sunday opening of shops and big stores.

Is it good for people and their relationships and life to wander together with others through a Christmas market on an Advent Sunday and buy nice small presents, and yet damaging for them to go into the big store next door to choose and buy their Christmas presents? The setting of specific limits and the legal determination of which work is allowed to be done on the Sabbath or a holiday and which forbidden, which work has positive effects on people or negative ones, these specific limits have not only led to conflicts in the time of Jesus; they are and they remain difficult for our churches and also for a pluralist and democratic state.

But these difficulties should not stop us from facing the theological, social and ethical challenges that the slow undermining of the holiday rule presents.

A cultural countermovement against any further erosion of Sunday protection can be felt in the Rhenish church, for example in the past year congregations have raised their voice for the protection of Advent Sundays (e.g. in Bonn). We have to continually point out that Advent is only in the Advent period and that

the quiet Sundays also have their own dignity and necessary function for us all. And within the churches of the EKD considerations are on the way to restart the Sunday campaign initiated in former times by our church.

#### **4. Reflections on mercy killing**

In September 2006 with a great majority the Association of German Jurists called for a law that should regulate mercy killings and decisions at the end of life in a new way: patients' living wills should be considered as binding in such a way that the stopping of treatment and not switching on life-supporting machines should be legally allowed as against the present ruling, even before the dying phase has begun. The failure to apply saving measures for people who have attempted to commit suicide should no longer be punishable. Doctors should be allowed to help the suicide of those extremely seriously ill. The Federal Minister of Justice Zypries does not see any need for a new law at present; however she wishes to legally anchor the binding nature of patients' living wills and refuses the limitation of this only to incurable illnesses in a final stage.

In repeated statements the Federal Chamber of Physicians and doctors' organisations have spoken against allowing active mercy killing. The question of a practice of dying responsibly before God and fellow human beings is also being raised anew in our church in face of medical progress, an increasingly secularised society and different legal rulings in our neighbouring European countries. A general answer with the statement "God alone is Lord over life and death, therefore active mercy killing is unthinkable" does not do justice to the complexity of this question in my opinion.

On the one hand there are no fixed borders between passive, that is permitted mercy killing, and active, that is forbidden mercy killing. We are often moving in a legal limbo in such situations.

On the other hand, our biblical theological view of humanity challenges us to a more differentiated debate on this subject.

Christians believe that heaven and earth and all human life is thanks to the creative will of God. Therefore it is valid to say: God the Eternal is Lord of the beginning and end of his creation and also every human life. But it is also valid to say: God the Eternal created human kind in his own image. God transferred responsibility for his creation to us people and empowers us "to be Lord over the work of his hands". (Psalm 8, verse 7) Therefore we cannot deviate from our responsibility for the beginning and the end of human life.

Responsibility for the end of human life in our understanding has mainly to do with care and pastoral counselling for those very seriously ill and their relatives, and also for extending and qualifying palliative medical services. This requires intensive caring human support and an optimum adjustment of painkillers for people whose death is approaching unavoidably. Respect for the

dignity of every single person demands that we should care for the highest possible freedom from pain, even if this should mean a shortening of life. In border cases, where people are terminally ill with terrible pain and suffering, a palliative sedation (an artificial coma) can be a final option, saving patients from extreme pain and a condition no longer tolerable for them.

It therefore belongs to the profile of Protestant hospitals, old people's homes and hospices to aim for the highest standard in the quality of their palliative care.

At this point I would like to thank all those who professionally and voluntarily work in accompanying the dying in hospital, old people's homes and hospices for their very important service.

Our God-given responsibility for the end of human life reaches its limits, when other people's human dignity and right to life is denied. Active mercy killing for pragmatic financial or ideological reasons I must call sin - that is behaviour against the commands and will of God. It is however also not acceptable when the life of a terminally ill person is artificially extended against their expressed wish on account of the possibilities of medicine.

The question whether our God-given responsibility also includes the personal decision about the end of our own life cannot in my opinion be negated in an apodictic manner.

But I am also convinced that there are people and have always been people, who for the sake of love wrestled through to a legally forbidden active mercy killing.

A fundamental decision, whether and to what extent in a specific situation the offer or the refusal of mercy killing can be understood as an expression of Christian love for our neighbour, cannot be decided once and for always. The conditions for this cannot be defined absolutely. There will always be cases where it is necessary to weigh up and take decisions that with absolute clarity can neither be considered as active or as passive mercy killing, and for which the responsibility before God and the persons concerned can be considered and argued in very different ways. Therefore I refuse a legal freedom for active mercy killing and encourage those in such situations to decide bound to their own conscience and in accordance with their understanding of love.

## **5. Reflections on the situation of society**

Summer 2006 in our country has been described by many quite correctly as a "summer fairy tale". It was not only that we were offered wonderful football, but above all the people were convincing for others with their fair enthusiasm on the streets and in front of the big screens. There was neither hooliganism nor riots.

Many of our church congregations also made it possible for people to celebrate the Football World Cup as a joyful, exciting and enthusiastic event within a larger community.

I would like to thank all those who made this possible from the regional church, and those responsible in the church districts and in the congregations.

Even now in the “winter thereafter”, there is a good mood in our country. In the news, on the stock exchange and in the economic prognoses there is talk of an economic upswing and a feeling of things turning for the better. The government is at last able to improve on its income situation and present budgets that legally conform to the constitution. It is not only that the profits and income are increasing from capital and business activity – the upswing is also reaching the job market. The number of socially-insured jobs has increased for the first time after many years of decreasing.

As much as we rejoice at this good news and also appreciate it, we must take care that economic growth does not bypass whole sections of the population whose situation has continually deteriorated in the last decades.

A study by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung shocked the public in Germany with the news that eight per cent of the population belong to the so-called underclass. The word “Prekariat” (meaning people living in precarious circumstances) does not quite sound so ugly to characterise this situation and is therefore preferable when speaking of what is meant.

However I cannot really comprehend the recent conflict about the term “underclass”. How else should we describe this group of people at the lower edge of our society, without painting too rosy a picture or even keeping quiet about the situation of these people? For is not an improvement of their situation dependent also on a realistic characterisation of it?

In addition the situation has long been well-known. Social reports from the national government and the federal states (NRW 2004, new: 2007, Rhineland-Palatinate 2004), academic institutions, the foundations of the parties, ... all delivered increasingly sound knowledge on poverty and wealth in Germany. Poverty is ever increasing and hardening and wealth is doing the same.

This constantly drifting apart of our society leads to the situation that social insecurity is very widespread in our country. In spite of an economic trend change, it is still considered to be the dominant social sentiment. 49 per cent of the people fear that they will not be able to keep up their standard of living according to a questionnaire by Infratest, 39 per cent fear that they will be dependent on social welfare when they are old. Disillusionment with politics among these insecure people has already led them to feeling dangerously alienated from our democracy and society.

The EKD Council with its memorandum “Just participation – empowerment for self-responsibility and solidarity” and the Synod of the EKD in autumn with their declaration “Justice raises a people up, poverty must be fought against – wealth means responsibility” took a stand on questions of poverty, wealth and

justice. The memorandum brought together diverse concepts of justice within the concept of a just share or participation. Just distribution and just empowerment are essential conditions for just participation.

I expressly agree with the memorandum and the declaration. Participation through education must receive special notice. Better opportunities for education are a decisive key to participation in society and vocational success. For this reason it will be necessary for more action on the part of the state – also financially – in this field of work.

We as churches will also remain reliable partners, for example in the work in the kindergarten and also in our responsibility in schools. However it cannot be accepted that our state partners presume as a matter of course that church funds should remain available to the same amount as in former times for the financing of genuine state tasks - or even be increased - in spite of the reduction in church taxes. Budget cuts in these areas as has occurred in North Rhine-Westphalia cannot be understood.

Two highly explosive business decisions were experienced in the past year within the area of our regional church.

The closing of the location of Cologne was announced by the insurance company Allianz Deutschland AG and the insolvency of the mobile phone manufacturer BenQ was made public in Kamp Lintfort.

The shedding of jobs by Allianz in Cologne has baffled understanding and was rejected in face of the very good income situation of the company and the fact that the Cologne location had received awards for outstanding performance.

In Kamp Lintfort the impression has arisen that the originally responsible Siemens company with an overall equally good income situation had tried to rid itself of an unloved branch of work at a low price. For bankruptcy was declared not even 12 months after the transfer of the company to BenQ.

Particularly two consequences of bankruptcy bring doubts to the seriousness of the business actions of Siemens and BenQ. Only a few years ago the employees agreed to up to 30 per cent cuts in their wages and salaries in order to save their jobs. As a result they now face reduced maintenance and support claims.

And those who took early retirement now experience that the money that the firm had saved to help finance their early retirement has disappeared.

At present the situation is this: Cologne is able to relax a little for the location should remain, however with considerably fewer employees. In Kamp Lintfort however no one can say what will happen there.

Our church on the spot stood by the employees and their families with all the possibilities they had – and for that I would like to thank all those concerned very much!

Over the last ten years the battle for training places has escalated.

Besides those businesses who refuse to offer training, we should particularly make public those who concern themselves in an exemplary way with the

training of young people. We are grateful that there are companies, for whom top marks are not the only criteria when selecting their apprentices.

As a regional church we have also made our modest contribution with our action Seven times Seven:

With our financial support we wanted to enable at least seven additional training places to be offered in seven problem regions within our church area. In the end it was possible to support 70 extra training places.

At the moment we are helping 20 young people from our congregations and diaconal institutions who had failed to find a training place by late autumn, by helping them to get paid and socially secured six-month work experience positions with the Deutsche Post AG. They are most likely to receive a training place with the Deutsche Post at the end of their work experience time.

It is just this possibility of learning a trade or profession that I consider to be so decisive for the development of young people. On the one hand they experience writing 50 or more applications as very discouraging, partly also as very demeaning when they do not even receive a reaction to their application letter. On the other hand every rejection is also experienced as disinterest in their person – with all the consequences that can follow. And finally a good education is still the decisive key for participation in the life of society and for the development of self-respect and self-confidence. So please continue to support all efforts to set up new apprenticeship training places and help as far as you can to enable young people to be accepted for such training. Finally I would like to close this section with one or two comments on the Düsseldorf Esser Ackermann case. First of all: it is a good thing that this case had to be opened up once again after the ruling of the Federal Supreme Court. However the result is unsatisfactory.

Even if it is legal to conclude a case by the payment of an agreed amount of money to prevent a judgement being passed, it is a problematic signal and it violates many citizens' sense of justice. It leaves a bad taste in the mouth.

## **6. Reflections on integration and migration**

In political discourse integration is often reduced to the learning of the language and the passing on of general information about the rules of our society. However this does not sufficiently take into consideration the omissions in long-established integration policies.

If integration is to succeed, much stronger focus must be laid on education. Whereby the following considerations are of extreme importance:

1. Kindergarten and schools can use their opportunities for integration and the overcoming of disadvantages in a very special way. However they are reaching their limits for the necessary differentiation. Above all there must be a considerable increase in the funds available for this work.

2. Education in a foreign country leads to forgoing integration in one's origins and traditions – beginning with one's mother tongue – and leads also to a limitation in the possibilities of return. Educational measures therefore prepare people far more for remaining and integration and much less for return or even deportation.

“What takes a long time is finally very good”, can hardly be said of the ruling on the right to stay, which the permanent conference of the Ministers of the Interior and Senators of the federal states (IMK) resolved on November 17, 2006 in Nuremberg.

The Ministers of the Interior wish to leave the refugees who have been “tolerated” for many years in this legal state of “toleration” and call upon the foreigners first of all to find work; this decision can only be meaningfully put into practice, if the “toleration” is freed from the mobility limitation (not being allowed to cross the town or district borders), and the priority principle (only after attempts to find a German or EU foreigner for the job have failed is it possible to offer it to a “tolerated person”). For to find work as a “tolerated person” is almost impossible under the present legal construction.

Therefore only those can heave a sigh of relief who already had a permanent job on the marked day. And to refuse all the family the right to stay, if one member of the family has committed a crime, is neither just nor humane.

Now we must fear that the federal states make different administrative rulings when putting the IMK decision into practice. For the person concerned that can mean that in one federal state he or she will be given a residency permit and in the other it will be refused. That is also something that should not be the case in a state based on the rule of law.

Unfortunately in Germany human trafficking is also an issue with regard to migration. In most cases women are trafficked for the purpose of sexually exploiting them, almost 70 per cent of the victims coming from Central and Eastern Europe. Trafficking women into prostitution is sexual violence against women, a criminal offence in the sense of the criminal code and therefore a crime.

Through this crime more money is earned annually than by dealing with drugs or weapons. It is one of the greatest social challenges that we face at present. For the last ten years the Evangelical church in the Rhineland has organised conferences on the right to asylum at a European level. In September 2006 the 9<sup>th</sup> European Asylum Law Conference took place in Kiev on the subject of trafficking women. “We will not stand by and do nothing in the face of human trafficking. Whoever exploits women receives the red card”, was the motto of the conference.

How can we prevent human trafficking? And how can those concerned be protected? It became clear that any attempt to effectively fight against the trafficking of women must also include the areas “prevention”, “victim protection” and “perpetrator persecution”.

In Kiev it was agreed to link the networking for the fight against the trafficking of women in the countries of Moldavia, the Ukraine, and Belarus with projects in Germany (North Rhine-Westphalia), France and Spain. For this purpose a training workshop will already take place in February 2007 in the Centre Froialle le Pont in Paris. You can all get to know more about this subject at the 31<sup>st</sup> German Protestant Kirchentag in Cologne in the Centre for Migration. Make use of this opportunity, support and please encourage all those working in this field through your interest and your visit.

## **7. Reflections on security and peace policies**

Questions of security in “normal political business” are unfortunately often seen as only relevant for the military. It is depressing enough that last year attempts were made to solve many cases of conflict in a military way – with the well-known disastrous results especially for the civilian population. In this context we only need to mention the last battle of weapons between Israel and the Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Our declaration on this subject on July 24 last year, caused critical reactions especially within our church, but also many positive reactions. Its intention was to be a pastoral call for prayer made to our congregations and to the Jewish cult congregations within the area of our church, for intercession for and contacts with the affected people in Israel, Lebanon and Palestine. Letters of solidarity were also sent to the Leo-Baeck-College in Haifa, to Nes Ammim, to Beit Jala as well as to the Bishop of the Palestine Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land.

The criticism arose from the short comments on cause and effect in this conflict. We were accused of narrowing the complicated mixture of cause and effect in this declaration to the present cause of the Israeli military operation, the provocations of the Hezbollah and Hamas, and of being silent about the long-standing human rights and national rights violations of the Israeli government in the past years. In the statements, some of which were very lengthy, Israel was accused of being neo-colonial, imperialistic, fascist, racist and Nazi, often with reference to radically critical Jewish voices. Our church was accused of an “Israel cult bias”. Yes, the declaration was even placed as belonging to the group of “Christian Zionists”. Again and again suspicion was expressed that our church was a prisoner of the guilt of the past and for this reason was failing to do the right thing and make the appropriate comments in the present.

I reject this criticism outright. Its wholesale nature alone takes away any credibility.

However our church and I are bound to the position that was formulated in this way in the synod resolution in 1980 for the renewal of the relationship between Christians and Jews:

“...the continued existence of the Jewish people, its return home to the Land of Promise and also the setting up of the State of Israel (are) signs of the faithfulness of God towards his people...”

Today in this present situation we continue on this way of understanding with open eyes and ears and therefore necessarily also with self-criticism.

And we are painfully aware that the Olmert Government in conjunction with the Bush Government honours a concept of security that is miles away from the visions and warnings of the Old Testament prophets, and also from those of Izchak Rabin. For they rely solely on military success.

But we also take seriously that in a shoulder-to-shoulder stand with the governments of Syria and Iran the leadership of the Hamas and the Hezbollah question fundamentally Israel's right of existence, as officially made clear in public appearances in December last year.

Above all, we will continue to support the institutions in Israel and Palestine that seek to find a way out of the useless confrontation between the Jewish and Arabian world through trust-building measures. This seems to me today to be the best service to peace that we can offer.

### **Concluding remarks**

God will keep his church, even in times of a dwindling number of members and less financial power. The risen Jesus Christ is present in our congregations and in our church. Therefore trusting in the Word of God we shall remain full of life, shall develop strengthening and healing activity, and with a sharpened consciousness seek and find new direction.

We thank all those responsible that in the past year the congregations and church districts have faced up to the often painful and difficult processes of change. In these days in this Synod meeting we will push the reform process a good part further. May all our efforts be carried in a promising and encouraging way by the text for the New Year:

“Watch for the new thing I am going to do. It is happening already – you can see it now!” (Isaiah 43,19)