

At the Fringes and in the center - Racism in Germany
A brief report of the session during Kirchentag on 14 May 2010
By Deenabandhu Manchala

Over 700 people attended this session that was featured by powerful presentations, engaged discussion and high energy. The response of the audience amply testified to their consensus that the presence and practice of racism in their midst is a serious challenge to their affirmation and practice of Christian faith.

The session was also organized to share the report of a two week study and visitation programme on Racism, Rightwing Extremism and Group-focused Enmity launched by four churches and three organizations in Germany (Nordelbian Evangelical Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hanover, Protestant Church of Middle-Germany, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Mecklenburg, EED, BFD and MISEREOR) with a group of international experts. These were: Dawn Linder, South Africa; Bev Thomas, UK; Jayne Oasin, USA; Fr. Silvester Rwomukubwe, Uganda and Paul Divakar, India. They visited four states in West and East Germany including places such as Hamburg, Schwein, Guestrow, Hannover, Verden, Weimer, Erfurt and Jena. A host team of several representatives of the host churches/institutions coordinated this programme.¹

The team presented their findings and learnings not only about the negative but also about what and how the churches are responding to these challenges. It was acknowledged that the idea of this study by an international team had taken shape in response to the WCC Conference on Racism and related forms of discrimination and exclusion in Doorn, Holland in June 2009. I was invited to locate this study within the context of WCC's responses to racism and also to make a few observations about how this can inspire the wider ecumenical community. On behalf of the World Council of Churches, I thanked them for this initiative, encouraged them to persist and assured WCC's continued partnership. At the end of the session, copies of the Findings and Recommendations were formally handed over to the representatives of the sponsoring churches and organizations and the WCC.

Let me highlight a few outstanding features of this initiative and the session:

¹ Julika Koch, Wolfgang Vogelmann, (Northelbian Ev.-luth. Church), Nora Nübel (Regional Centre for a democratic Culture, Ev.-luth. Church of Mecklenburg), Klaus J. Burckhardt, Rainer Kiefer (Ev.-luth. Church of Hannover), Christhard Wagner (Ev. Church on Middle Germany), Walter Hahn (Platform Dalit Solidarity in Germany, Breat for the World), Johannes Brandstaeter (Politics of Migration, Diakonale Services Germany) Wolfgang Heinrich (Evangelical Development Service EED), further support offered by: MISEREOR.

1. The study cum visitation programme arises, not out of a location of victimhood but out of a self-understanding of a faith community that recognized racism as a serious challenge to its profession and practice of Christian faith in Germany. To that extent, racism is not seen just as a social phenomenon or one that requires diakonal response to the victims but as one that is deeply spiritual and moral.
2. This expression of concern needs to be seen as the churches' resolve to understand the implications of their faith beyond themselves. It is also an expression of solidarity with movements of these sections struggling for dignity and justice in many parts of the world. Usually, if those affected communities and people do not talk about issues such as racism, gender discrimination, caste discrimination, etc., others don't and some even deny it. Therefore, this initiative is unique and hence needs to be presented as model for others elsewhere.
3. The reality of some being denied of their basic rights to live as human beings with dignity and the reality of these sections being subjected to violence and suffering on account of certain cultures of domination and discrimination were the reasons for churches to come and work together. Indeed a good model for ecumenism in action and unity for and in witness!
4. The sponsors - churches and church related organizations opened themselves up to outsiders to account for what they have done and are doing in response to a scourge that plagues their society. As such, it is an act in humility and I wish many more churches would follow the suit and hold each other accountable in our work to overcome those forces that work against God's will in the world.
5. Racism is a violent culture. It allows, encourages and legitimizes violation and violence against some because it prompts that they are inferior and therefore expendable. So much so that majority of victims of any form of violence are those who are thus disempowered and disenfranchised.
6. Therefore, racism poses serious challenges to our efforts to overcome violence. It prompts us to affirm and safeguard the dignity of every human being and to strive for justice so that peace may be real.
7. Churches are called to be just and inclusive communities, not

only seeking unity among themselves but making that unity real by becoming inclusive within. As part of their witness they have the responsibility to confront and transform these cultures of violence and death that deny, abuse and destroy life.

8. Racism is not an ideological or structural phenomenon anymore that we could take on and end it like the way we did it in South Africa. It is a cultural phenomenon, an instrument of power and domination, and of subjugation and depravation. It is about attitudes, about views of oneself and of the other. We are not immune to these influences nor are our churches.

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2010