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Ethnic Churches and German Baptist Culture

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The history of mankind is the history of migration. In difficult situations people emigrate from their home countries immigrating to other countries where they hope to find a better future. Since the last decades of the 20th century, Eastern Europe has been a region of emigration: Many people left their homes going to Western Europe or to Northern America. On the other side, Western Europe, including Germany has been a region of immigration. Because of its situation of welfare, security etc., people from all over the world have immigrated into this region to build a new life. For a long time, the politicians in Germany have ignored the fact that Germany is a country of immigration¹, but the statistics of the last years show clearly that there are big movements and changes within the population living in Germany.

The last official statistics of the Government show that about 10% of the population are “migrants in a strict sense” (immigrants and their children) and about 10% of the population are “migrants in a wider sense” (grand-children of immigrants). If you see that the percentage of births and of young people among the migrants is much higher than among the “German-German” population, you can imagine that German society is becoming more and more multicultural. Most of these people (80%) with non German roots living in Germany have their origin somewhere in the EU. Also the proportion of the Turkish population is quite high. Then you find a growing number of Russians and a declining number of Balkan people in Germany.

No wonder that this development of migration, which began in the 1960s with the immigration of Turkish and Italian guest workers, has its effects on the situation of Baptist churches in Germany. Whereas the Turkish immigrants were not really reached with the Gospel² and most Italians and Spanish found their spiritual home in the German Roman-Catholic church, many other nationalities coming to Germany as refugees, students, or businessmen gathered in free, Pentecostal or some type of protestant ethnic Christian communities.

Since the 1980s the German Baptist Union has looked on these developments and delegated the accompanying of these groups and churches to the former Home mission department. Due to the commitment of the mission secretaries and their regional co-workers, you find today about 200 ethnic and international groups and churches in the context of the German Baptist Union. In detail,

¹ Exception: Invitation of guest workers of Italy, Spain and Turkey to help to reconstruct the economy in Germany in the 60ies.

² There are only 4 small Turkish-speaking Christian communities in the German Baptist Union. In other denominations, there are not essentially more Turkish Christian communities.

you find Russian speaking groups (25), English (especially Ghanaian) and French (especially Congolese) speaking African churches (40) and Tamil churches (23), some Vietnamese churches (9), a growing number of Iranian Christian groups, Burmese Churches and about 30 English-speaking Baptist churches of the "International Baptist Convention". These international churches born out of the former churches organized by American military personnel for purposes of worship , gather today a colourful international Christian folk in their midst. The Convention itself (and with it its individual churches) is an associate member of the German Baptist Union.

The mono- and the multiethnic international churches on the list of the German Baptist Union have different forms of gatherings: Some come together as *group within a local German Baptist Church*, some were adopted by the German church as a *daughter church*, some have become *self-sustaining member churches* of the Union, others choose the *associate membership* which the Union offers especially in the case when both sides have to test whether the local ethnic Church and the Union really fit together (in their rights and duties).

Today it's not only the Secretary for International Churches, Mission Secretary of the Union, who has the task of the integration of international and ethnic churches into the Union. The work is done by the convention leaders of the Union in cooperation with the task force group called "International Mission in Germany" (IMD). This group consisting of about eight co-workers of different regional and ethnic origin meets twice a year in order to regionalize and acculturate the integration work as much as possible.

The vision of IMD is the peregrinating people of God, men and women of all cultures and nations marching to the Zion, symbol for the coming Kingdom of God. On its way, the international people of God are inviting all kinds of people to join them marching in the light of God.

In the light of this vision, IMD has the following goals:

1. to encourage the international churches in their mission work in Germany, among their ethnics and among Germans.
2. to integrate the international churches into the Union.
3. to sensitise the German churches and the associations for the challenge of the international presence in Germany.
4. to take care of interdenominational and international contacts to accomplish its tasks.

Every second year the leaders and pastors of the international churches and networks meet with the President or the General Secretary of the Union to be aware of each other and to discuss the present subjects and challenges on all sides.

Special Challenges in view to the German Baptist Culture

As many of the Migration Churches, especially African, Tamil and Latin American Churches, have a more Pentecostal character, we face some challenges in order to grow together. For very different reasons, they decided to join not the Pentecostal Union, but the Baptist Union. As we all are churches of committed Christians, we have in common convictions like the importance of conversion, of spiritual life and discipleship in praying and reading the Bible, and of the relevance of mission. Nevertheless, many of these churches are living out their faith in a way which is quite irritating for originally German Baptists. I want to mention the following marking points of German Baptists:

Congregations of expatriates versus middle class churches

At their beginnings, Baptists in Germany have known very well the experience of being treated like outcasts. As marginalised people they had to fight for their civil rights in Germany and for recognition. Most of their members came out of poverty or were engaged as craftsmen. In the meantime, they have developed into being a recognised group in Germany, being well settled in the higher middle class in society. Many of them are politically conservative, sharing all anxiousness and aversion against the refugees who have come into their midst profiting from the financial social funds in Germany without having worked to build up this social network. This attitude, tangible in some churches, leads to xenophobic behaviours. As Christians, they allow the group of Christian Afghans to gather in their building, they even baptise them, but they do not want them to become members of their church. Other churches do not succeed in handling the different understanding of cleanness, of noise, of property sharing and so on. When the group of foreigners has to leave the building of a German Church, it often means the rupture of relations.

The present policy of the Union indicates the efforts to counterbalance this suspicion against “the foreigners”. International Churches have been encouraged to become members of the Union, the Union is ready and willing to make all forms of agreements that they become members even if they cannot fulfil all financial duties and all the rules established through the years by the German Baptists.

Denominational versus interdenominational Churches

Some ethnic churches, especially from Asia (Vietnam and Korea), orientate at the Baptist Union, but, in fact, they are a sort of melting pot of different denominations. This character sometimes is due to their organisation in their original countries (Vietnam) where Baptist and other Evangelical Churches form together one church body. The members of many Korean Churches are Baptists or Presbyterians. Despite the fact, that in Korea, they form different ecclesial bodies, in Germany, because of their isolated situation in the foreign land (cultural reasons), they form one church, having once a Presbyterian pastor once a Baptist pastor. Having a Baptist pastor at their top, they orientate at our Union. Those who belong to our Union, in our statistics, we ask them to name only the Baptist members of their Church, which might lead to the result that this number is quite few whereas the number of the co-workers and of those who come to the service is quite huge.

In fact, our Union has not yet developed a concept to respond to this situation. It is not only the fact that most do not know about this situation, but also the tendency among Baptists in Germany to leave the old-pattern understanding of baptism and membership, that these churches might be tolerated among us. The growing ecumenical openness of Baptist Churches in Germany might also open the doors for these interdenominational churches with a kind of Baptist identity.

Congregational versus paternalistic ecclesiology

German Baptists developed in the 19th century as a counter model of church against the state churches (Roman-Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed). They have their roots partly in the congregational movement of the Anglo-Saxon dissenters, partly in the Lutheran Awakening Movements in Germany in the 19th century. Both movements have in common that they wanted to form churches of committed Christians. Neither a single person nor a group of leaders has the upper authority in church, but the community of Christians as church members. It is the coming together of the forces and gifts of these church members which make the church alive. Some functions of leadership might have been delegated to some persons, for example, the pastor or the church leader/secretary, but their responsibility is limited by the democratic decisions made congregationally in the church assembly.

Most international churches share the importance of commitment of every single member. But many of them, especially the more Pentecostal churches of Africa, Latin America and Asia, have very strong single leaders who act as sovereigns in their midst, as pastors, as bishops or as apostles. Their church structures on the whole are more hierarchical or paternalistic than those in the German Baptist Churches. You may cite two reasons for this difference: First, most people coming from the Two Thirds World have their origins in cultures whose societies function in paternalistic and even hierarchical ways. The father, the chief, the president are the decisive figures in these societies. All persons orientate to their models and decisions. When people of these societies immigrate to Germany, they bring their paternalistic pattern with them even in forming Christian groups and churches.

It is, secondly, part of the experience of Church planting, that, at the beginning, you need a strong person to bring the project forward. This person must be modelled in a way that people can identify with him and orientate toward him. Many migration churches have been born in a kind of house group, Bible group, prayer group which has borne in its midst a kind of leader who took over this role of father and chief. On the long run, these leaders must learn not only to distribute responsibilities among their church members but even to share their power. This diffusion of leading responsibilities is one of the primary conditions for the continuing sound development of the church in general, and particularly of immigration churches. As a historically grown movement in Germany, Baptist churches can help international Churches to advance to this step of democratisation as the best model of power-sharing in the church. More and more originally non-confessional migration churches orientate themselves to recognised free churches in Germany (Pentecostal, Baptist/Brethren, Free evangelical) to get out of their sectarian status and to have more guaranties to survive into the future.

Union churches versus autonomous churches

Belonging to the Baptist Union entails rights and duties. Churches like to live out the rights as members of a recognised corporate church in Germany, but they do not like to come up to the duties of their membership. Duties are to share the tasks and challenges of the Union, in transferring the fixed amount to the Union treasurer or participate in the central assemblies of the Union. This problem does not only concern international churches but also German-German Churches in the Baptist Union. It is not a real problem among the 20 international churches who decided recently to become members of the Union. They have problems to cover their financial duties in view to the Union because of their persisting financial problems. But they can find solutions in communication with the Union treasurer. These financial problems hinder them sometimes to send their delegates to the assemblies. But in general, they do their best to come up to their duties because they feel the benefit of being members of the Union as a corporate church in Germany.

On the other hand, about 100 international groups and “churches” like to live somehow within the Baptist structures without becoming members of the Union. They fear to be “governed” by the big Church institution of the Union which will diminish the liberty and the power of the local church, especially at the background of the paternal leading persons in these churches. Sometimes, they utter the argument of the liberal character of the Union which they do not like, but the bottom of their distance to the institutional forms of the Union is the fear of too tight institutional links. .

You can also meet this distrust by communicating as much and as confidently as possible. You cannot force someone to share his power with others. You might even find some good biblical arguments that churches must stand together in the name of Jesus. But you can only convince by arguments that the advantages of sharing one’s life in the Union are stronger than the disadvantages. The precondition for these arguments is the confidential personal relationship which wipes out all wrong arguments.

Liquid versus consistent structures

The German Baptist Union was formed in 1834 for reasons of training of pastors and for statistics. This might be quite a German point for founding a Union. Until today, we are quite strong in counting our members, our gains and losses in membership, those who have died, those who have joined and those who have quit our churches and so on. Every year, every church must precisely fill in elaborate statistic forms giving all kinds of information about the developments in the church. At the annual Union Assembly, the leadership of the Union shares quite detailed information about the development in the churches during the last year.

The Baptist Union and its churches show the same well-established level in all areas of administration, also in finances. This style of administration overstrains the administrators of many international churches, who mostly have not received an adequate training for their responsibility. Or they do it in their way, in a non-German way. If they do not fill in adequately the statistic forms, it is not so dramatic because it does not have juristic consequences. But if it concerns the financial administration, failures may have legal consequences. The leaders of the regional substructures of the Union and the regional co-workers of “International Mission in Germany” try to help the administrators of international Churches to ameliorate their administrative work and they do some efforts to teach them how to fill in the statistic forms of the Union.

Theological training versus divine vocation

Many pastors of international churches do their pastoral work without having passed through an adequate theological training. They came as refugees to Germany, they engaged as leaders of ethnic Christian house groups, prayer groups, which, step by step, have grown and developed into churches. The leaders of these churches all over Germany know each other, they network with each other, with church leaders of the original countries. They organise national and international conferences with big and well-known pastors of their original countries, and these “apostles” confirm them in their ministry and even ordain them. Some of them engage in correspondence courses at Bible schools, some even found Bible schools in Europe (for example: “Institut Biblique et Théologique de Bochum” with branches in Amsterdam and Dublin). Essential for their pastoral recognition is their divine vocation which shows its character in the quality of their ministry recognised by the network of churches and pastors.

As a recognised Church in Germany, the Baptist Union shares the position of nearly all churches in this country that you can only become an ordained pastor if you pass at least five years of academic theological studies at a recognized University or Seminary finishing with a Master degree. At the same time, the Baptist Union has to face the fact that many churches appoint “not sufficiently qualified” persons to be their pastors. For integrating the best among them into the pastoral body, the Union invented theological programs for example, the “Contact Studies” and the “Program for pastoral training and integration” (about 12 participants) to give some additional theological education and to go with them some steps of integration in our Union.

All these contentious issues are due to different theological attitudes which have their origin in the fact that people live their faith according to their cultures. Everyone can learn from everyone. The challenge is to create a space where the settled Baptist churches and the Baptist churches of Immigrants can meet and learn from each other.

The long way of integration

Integration needs time. Everyone concerned has to go by certain steps which he cannot leap over. In the migration research, you think about the time of two or three generations, which you need for a sound integration which is helpful for all sides. If you accelerate this development too strongly, you may cause injuries. If you respect the natural move of integration, you will build up strong communities. During this time, you need bridge builders on all sides, who are pushing forward this integration movement. The basic challenge for the Baptist Union and its churches is to find a good balanced way of integration: On the one hand to respect the cultural diversity within and outside of the Union and to afford to these cultural churches and movements certain autonomy. On the other hand, we have to look for bridge builders who help to increase the common ground of the different cultural expressions of faith and church. At the end, it is not only that the immigrants become German Baptists, but also that the German Baptists change and become more colourful and vivid.