The current theological discussion on mission in the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) subsequent to the Mission Synod of 1999 in Leipzig

Opening speech for the theological conference between the Evangelical Church in Germany and the Church of England on January 11, 2011 in Sarum College, Salisbury
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I. The Situation and the Challenges
50 million Germans, that is two-thirds of the population, belong to a church. Yet both churches are suffering from a continual loss of members, a declining number of church-goers and the loss of plausibility in church as an institution. Nevertheless, the religion monitor of the Bertelsmann Foundation found out in 2008 that there is no decline in religiousness in Germany.\(^1\) Out of 80 million Germans, 50 million call themselves “religious,” every fifth person calls him/herself “extremely religious.” Are 10 million Germans “extremely religious?”

Admittedly, among 50 million church members the accentuation of one’s personal belief can be quite different. There are fewer and fewer Christians as such. The religion monitor also found out that at least 15% of all church members are not religious – their membership in the church is based on other factors that religious orientation.\(^2\) Is this religiousness without God?\(^3\) In the parts of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Brunswick that were subjected to two generations of totalitarian anti-Christian systems of rule there is among many people to some extent no knowledge of the content of Christian faith, many have never even been inside a church. The relationship to the church is characterized more by indifference than rejection.

This can be visualised as follows: somewhere close to an inner German border, in an area in which many people live who in the second and third generation have hardly any contact to the church and basically know nothing about the content of Christian faith, there is a community/congregation in which many young families live who are looking for contact with the church.

The responsible pastor went away to a health resort at the end of autumn in 2008. As he was only going to back shortly before Christmas he asked some of the young parents to prepare the Nativity play in the meantime. When he came home he was proudly presented with the results of their efforts: they had decided to choose a different fairy tale for that year and had put much time into preparing Rumpelstilzchen. The pastor took the offensive and presented it on Christmas Eve before the Midnight Service with great success. What else could he have done?

The people wanted to take part and help enable their children have contact with the church. Not knowing about the Biblical Christmas story they used something from

\(^1\) Bertelsmann Stiftung, Religionsmonitor 2008, Gütersloh 2007
\(^3\) Scholl, N., Religiös ohne Gott, Darmstadt 2010
their own tradition: every year there is a Christmas fairy tale – it doesn’t always have to be the same one!
A case that one as bishop can both laugh and cry about and which describes along with it so many aspects of our missionary challenges.

II. Rediscovering Mission
The theologian from Greifswald, Michael Herbst, correctly ascertains: “The rediscovery of mission is one of the deep reaching changes taking place between 1987 and 2010.”
He chose the year 1987 because it is the year in which his theological dissertation was published which deals with the topic “Building Congregations Using Mission in the National Church.” At the beginning of an EKD-wide discussion the debates and the EKD’s official statements from the Leipzig synod in 1999 are generally reviewed. Eberhard Jungle identified in his speech on the synodal principals, mission and evangelisation to be the ecclesiastical loopholes in evangelical theology: “If the church had a heart, then evangelisation and mission would influence to a great degree the rhythm of the church’s heart. And deficits in the missionary work of the Christian church, deficiencies in evangelisation would immediately lead to severe heart problems. The circulation within church life would become hypotonic. Whoever is interested in healthy circulation within church life must therefore also be interested in mission and evangelisation.”
On the condition that not only the Christian denominations but also the rest of the world and consequently those of no denomination are already saved by grace, he goes on: “If Christianity could breath, if it could inhale and could take a deep breath, then it would realize that there are two forms of grace when breathing … when inhaling the church reflects on itself, when exhaling it becomes outgoing.” Jüngel designates the process of inhaling as worship services. When exhaling the church subsequently approaches others anew, invites those on the street and fence to the wedding feast. (Mt. 22) If the church does not want to suffocate then it needs mission and of course missionary work.
However, the synod in 1999 was not so completely new and revolutionary as it was reported to be. For that reason a short review is necessary.
If one thought of mission over the centuries as doing the work of founding churches in a country or region in which there had never been churches, then at the beginning of the 1960’s the missions in the countries of the northern hemisphere had a crisis which was not caused by failure but conversely by success “because there were now in almost every country Christian churches and congregations.” Theologically speaking this crisis was confronted with the missio dei approach which was introduced at the Conference for World Mission in Willingen (1952). “If … God is according to His being understood as a missionary God, then the Christian church

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5 Jüngel, E., Referat zur Einführung in das Schwerpunktthema, siehe: www.ekd.de/synode99/referate_juengel.html
6 Jüngel, a.a.O.
8 Durch die Entwicklung dieses Konzeptes wurde es unmöglich, den Begriff eines menschlichen Missionsobjektes zu entfalten.
must also according to its being be like this God. What consequently followed was the implementing of several theological insights. The first insight states: Mission is … the job … of the whole church. For that reason the International Council on Mission (International Missionsrat) … was integrated into the Ecumenical Church Council (Ökumenische Rat der Kirchen – ÖRK). … The second insight came from the realization: if each church is a missionary church according to its being, then each church has to work on mission where it is." What is essential, however, is the recognition that God does not let himself be hindered "and lets his mission come to fruit the way He wants it to. … Mission in (therefore, F.W.) not an instrument for the church to use, rather church is mission (in the sense of the passing on of life), or it is not even church … If there is no mission, there is no church." Keep in mind this approach was directed with consequence toward the adoption of social ethical responsibility and not so much “the preaching task” which is always then heard when, at a Christian baptism the command to baptise in the name of the risen Christ, at the end of the missionary commission is read, which is inextricably wound with the command to go and teach those who do not know what Jesus commanded of his disciples." Huber concluded from this already in 1999 that a turning toward missionary tasks both internally and externally is necessary which, “based on the Protestant alliance of faith and reason, a missionary starting point” whose principle structure is dialogue has to be developed. The starting point of this new turn to mission was the obvious recognition brought about by the societal situation within the Federal Republic after 1989 that Christian faith “does not have any naturally recognised place. It has to first reconquer its place.” According to Wolf Krötke in 1996, people had left the church on a massive scale and now every individual – and many others who have never before had any contact with the Christian faith – has to be one back. An ecclesiastical response to the special problem area in the former GDR was the positional paper “Minority with a Future. Considerations and suggestions for the commissioning and forming of eastern German churches in a pluralistic society,” which was published in 1995. In it a missionary concept of building congregations was demanded which is both attractive to those who have distanced themselves from the church and those who are non-confessional and which should strengthen the existing church members and bind them more closely to the church. The ensuing discussions showed that the real difficulty, however, was less the dramatic loss of members as rather the loss of spiritual substance in the church. The result of this

9 Wrogemann, a.a.O., 299
13 Huber, a.a.O., 109
14 Huber, a.a.O., 118
15 Minderheit mit Zukunft, 19
discussion process is that Protestantism has to relearn to see the connection between spiritual certainty and the ability to bond with the church instead of playing them off against each other.”16

As did the Evangelical Church of the Union (EKU) with its text “Experience, Reflect, Act” 1996f, the conference in Arnoldshain in 1999 developed the position “Evangelisation and Mission.” The United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany (VELKD) published in 1999 along with “Mission Today,” “Topics for conversation for church groups and parish councils.” As a part of working out new guidelines for church work one team published in 1998 the paper “Church with Hope. Guidelines for future work in the church in east Germany.” In this text the polarity between a church that takes care of its members (Betreuungskirche) and a church of participation (Beteiligungskirche) was worked out. All of the thoughts and the programs resulting from them are a result of observations that I made in the 90’s, in the Netherlands as well. I think back on that time especially with the thought that we could have known what was coming our way:

- de-christianisation of society
- decline in church membership
- individualization of faith

One spoke of a “bricolage-faith,” that means a form of faith which one has constructed out of different philosophical elements and which can be differently influenced from one moment to the next. The experience from the Netherlands was not in the 90’s as massive as our experience, at least not in the churches of the former German Federal Republic. Yet at that time from certain trends – and from observations on the developments within the church in the new German states – it could still be discerned that church reality had clearly changed under the conditions which were caused by differentiation.17 In my home church in Hessen and Nassau we responded in 1996 to this challenge with the development of a communication process: “Evangelical for good reason.” Its goal was to bring protestant Christians into a discussion about the reason for their faith and their involvement with the church and to encourage them to come into contact with people outside of the church, stimulate the formation of an opinion about the introduction of a unified presentation for protestant congregations and serve to strengthen the identity of protestant Christians. It was so developed that it could not be mistaken for a commercial campaign and was ecumenically open. Similar processes also took place in other evangelical regional churches (Landeskirchen), sometimes the Hessian concept was used elsewhere, for example in Berlin-Brandenburg and Saxony-Anhalt.

16 Huber, a.a.O., 121
In Berlin-Brandenburg diverse projects were started that were more or less “directed toward the stabilising of communities and on the strengthening of their missionary charisma.”

III. The Mission-Synod in Leipzig 1999

The Mission-Synod in Leipzig in 1999 was therefore not the starting point for a new awareness of the missionary existence of the church, rather it represents the beginning time and place in which the initiatives and impulses which already existed in the evangelical regional churches were raised to the level of the EKD and through the synod’s resolution or rather through the publication of the synod’s declaration was legitimized as an expression of the missionary task “of the church on the brink of the 3rd millennium.”

The declaration stated: “The history of mission was also the history of guilt and failure, to learn from it and to look for forgiveness. The general discrediting of the history of Christian mission is however unjustified. This is refuted especially by those people who live in the former missionary areas in Africa or Asia; they tell us of the beneficial effects coming from the Christian missions of the past centuries that are still felt today. In the meantime the understanding of the missionary task has had far-reaching changes. Mission holds on to the intention to convince other people, which means to take then on a path upon which the certainty of Christian faith becomes their own certainty. However, it is done with humility and a readiness to learn. Mission understood in this way does not have to do with indoctrination or overwhelming. It is oriented on the joint question of looking for truth. It does without all massive or subtle means of force in the spirit of the Gospel and out of love, and aims at open approval. This kind of mission is marked by its respect for the convictions of others and has a dialogical character. The Spirit of God, which Christ promised would guide us in all truth (John 16:13), is also present in the meeting and dialogue with other convictions and religions.” It was unanimously established: “A sign will go out from this meeting of the synod: the evangelical church is putting the topic of faith and the missionary task at the top of the list, it is making room for a variety of concepts and methods and is stressing cooperation and the mutual supplementation of these different methods and concepts. There was a time in which one could have had the impression that the orientation towards mission was the trademark of only one current within our church. Today we say together, the passing on of faith and the growth of our congregations are our most pressing tasks, all our energy has to be concentrated on this topic. There are, however, no claims to sole representation. We will only be able to do justice to the missionary task when we say yes to a variety of methods and concepts.”

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20 Kundgebung IV,1
That a direct change in the Federal Republic of Germany has begun with this synod’s resolution, is quantified by Wilhelm Richelbächer with the ascertainment: “In spite of this new trend in the protestant church family there still stand in the way two extreme tendencies which are supported by minorities, either to make the topic taboo, or more specifically to ‘finally give it up’ or with an arrogant attitude to return to a strategy of proving the superiority of one’s own religion with the effect of the proving the inferiority of the other religions. But between these extremes the opinions of the great majority of church members go in the direction of seeing mission for the reason of gaining new members as important, however they are unsure and wonder if this might damage the peace between religions. For this reason they are reticent when talking about this topic.”

The common denominator seems to lie in that no one regards a form of mission as the charismatic presence of a credibly lived Christianity as going too far and endangering the peace between the religions.

IV. The current theological debate on mission

I will interpret the current discussion and describe its goal orientation in a few hypotheses. On the whole the following positions can be discerned:

a. Mission as the worldwide partnership for questions on peace, justice and environmental conservation

In this context Reiner Kiefer argues: “I am discerning a certain dynamism which is leading in a circular process from the worldwide community through partnership and dialogue to the worldwide engagement for justice.” “Because God wants it, Christian churches in worldwide mission are on the road together as partners.” “Because our world needs reconciliation we want to overcome religious, cultural and political boundaries. Encounters with people who are different widen horizons. The can also come with conflicts. When standpoints are brought to word with mutual respect, true dialogue begins. This is how people, communities and worlds are transformed.”

b. Mission as keeping alive the question of God beyond territorial boarders

On this point I cite Theodor Ahrens: “The understanding about what missionary praxis is should be ‘de-territorialized.’ Nevertheless mission remains unceasingly a way of faith ‘to the limit,’ a way of faith ‘on the limit,’ a movement to change one’s ways set off by faith, which is the right thing to push the church again and again out of its calm stability into motion – in short an unsettling of the church itself.” “The church’s first missionary task is to keep the question of God alive.” “Mission as faith’s lobby takes part in God’s self-

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22 http://www.mission.de/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf-dateien/materialheft_1.pdf, 4f
chosen limitation, in God’s weakness in this world, which will still not succumb to evil.”

c. Mission in the context of globalisation as intersubjective dialogue

Anton Knuth argues: “Mission means ‘sending’ the Gospel to the world, means to give testimony to the ‘hope which is within me.’ (1 Peter 3:15).” “Faith is certainty of being (Daseinsgewissheit) ... Therefore, in a globalized world it is exactly this which is confirmed through intersubjective dialogue. Being a Christian for myself alone is not enough.” “We are not only the subject of mission but also its object.” “Mission leads to a debate with claims to truth from others and leads back to a renewal of established identities.” “Dialogue and mission are not contradictions because a Christian understanding of mission will always have to be measured by the standard of love (agapé).”

d. Mission as increasing membership and winning people for the church congregation

Wilhelm Richerbächer has noted: “The outwardly directed, centrifugal goal from the viewpoint of the church as the vehicle of mission consists in telling all people about the complete salvation which came with Jesus Christ and to give room to God’s reign of peace as its sign for all living conditions. ... To this all encompassing objective follows the second from the viewpoint of the church inwardly centripetal goal of the gaining of members for the church. It follows the first but is not less important.” “The second goal of mission, that is rather one of the natural fruits of work ... is consequently the winning over of people for the community of an actual church.”

e. Mission as the conversion of people to each other and therefore the struggle for the unity of the church

Andreas Feldkeller describes this correlation: “Wherever we turn in the New Testament: mission does not only have the meaning that people be converted to Jesus Christ who did not already know him. Mission in the New Testament is only then complete when people are converted to each other: moreover, to have community together as people who were previously enemies – people for whom it was previously unthinkable that they could have anything to do with each other.” “The struggle for unity among Christian of different milieus in Germany and the struggle for unity among Christians in different regions of the world belong together.”

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26 http://www.mission.de/fileadmin/user_upload/pdf-dateien/materialheft_1.pdf, 36f
f. Mission as planned dialogical conduct

This approach is found in the Guideline of the Evangelical Church in Rheinland “Being a Missionary People’s Church (Volkskirche) – The development and Implementation of a Guideline.”27 It lists under “2. ‘Being missionary’ – spontaneous, planned and dialogical action.” Working areas for the missionary task: “Service (diakonia), community (koinonia), worship (leiturgia), witness (martyria)” and the “commitment to justice, peace and protection of creation.” It is stipulated that a people’s church has according to Barmen VI to tell “all the nations” of God’s free grace. “As a people’s church, the Rhein Church wants to be a missionary church since “mission protects a people’s church from non-commitment – a people’s church protects mission from narrowness and losing touch with reality.” The thought is a relief and also a question: “If the church does not grow that can be a result of our failure. However, it can also be that God would like to lead us into a time of probation and reflection. For that reason not growing leads us to critically question ourselves as a church, to listen to the Word of God anew and to anticipate the Holy Spirit.” Descriptions of ten fields of activity for a missionary-based people’s church with control questions follow. The fields of activity are:

1. Acknowledge and help others understand the Bible
2. Discover and live spirituality
3. Publish worship services
4. Intensify community and keep it accessible
5. Take on and share social responsibility
6. Realize compassion through social work and spiritual direction
7. Accept and share educational responsibility
8. Accompany and interpret individual’s journeys through life
9. Promote faith publicly and personally
10. Acknowledge the worldwide church as enrichment and challenge

V. Concrete consequences in the EKD

1. The “missionary mood” in the EKD

- has grown and there is a greater openness to confront the topic of mission

- mission is no longer a special activity done by the very “pious” but has moved into the centre of the church

- talking about faith and one’s own convictions of faith are taking up more room and are a good balance for the heavy debates on structure in many of the evangelical regional churches

- the differences of living faith in its different forms (which can be shown in regional comparisons and is well known) are being increasingly mutually recognized and are seen as an enrichment

- “amazement effect”: the “pious” are amazed that mission is suddenly no longer the interest of only one splitter group and the “liberals” are amazed that among their own group mission is no longer a negative topic – the fronts are beginning to crumble

2. The Centre for Mission in the Region (ZMiR)

The centre is an institute within the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD). Together with other newly founded centres it tries to support the implementation of the goals that for the process of reform in the EKD are stated in the flyer “Church of Freedom.”

3. The Institute for the Research on Evangelisation and Development of Congregations (IEEG)

The theological faculty in Greifswald opened on April 1, 2004 the first statewide institute that deals principally in university research and teaching with the topics of evangelisation and development of congregations. The IEEG does research and teaches in these areas in light of a post-Christian society. This takes place in scientific research, in university teaching, in consulting for committees of church leaders as well as in the further education of its pastors.

4. Faith courses

In 2011 a workbook will be published with the title, “Courses in Faith,” in which different course approaches will be presented side by side. Along with it there will be an EKD-wide campaign and with it the goal that each interested person must not have to drive more than 25 km to the next course. This is an ambitious undertaking which requires the co-operation not only of the regional churches at the upper level but particularly on the middle and community levels – there is in some areas the discussion as to whether faith courses actually help people come to faith or, depending upon the intention and approach of the course, are strengthened in their existing faith or not. The positive signals are, however, not to be overheard. “The interest in … faith courses is continually high with insiders as well as with those who are farther away from the church. When there is a good balance between well presented faith testimony, pleasant hospitable surroundings and friendly participation then faith courses are almost a guarantee for the process of growth in the believing community. Those interested need these courses in order to know at all what the Christian faith is about. Church members use them to reconfirm themselves and to

28 www.zmir.de
29 http://www.theologie.uni-greifswald.de/institute/ieeg.html
delve deeper into their faith. Newcomers require sheltered areas and small groups for the practicing of faith.\textsuperscript{30, 31}

5. Church planting

In this context I would also like to direct attention to the Anglican Church’s inspiring experience with church plantings, which are being confirmed in the German context. Let us say in a geographically defined community there is a new development area in which practically no church activity takes place.

- The \textit{classic national church strategy} would be to wait until the people come on their own to their appropriate parish for worship services. …

- The \textit{national-missionary variation} would be to form a visiting committee that would welcome the new neighbours and invite them to the events in the congregation.

- A church planting could mean that several cells break off of the mother congregation and let themselves be planted in the new development area, they would have worship services perhaps in a kindergarden or a gymnasium or even in a pub, meet with the other members of their group, offer babysitting and simply live and work.\textsuperscript{32}

6. A practical example – Church on the marketplace – Blankenburg/Harz

Nine years ago my regional church in Blankenburg (Saxony-Anhalt) set up a missionary position for the east German city which with the surrounding area belonged to the Evangelical Church in Brunswick and sent a married couple there (the wife a priest but working voluntarily, the husband a priest) with the job of bringing the church into people’s awareness and to find ways and means to discover with those of no confession what Christian faith can be. It was from the beginning a position that exists side by side and independent of the work with the local congregation. At the same time we set up together with the Social Welfare Services of the Protestant Church and the church congregation a youth centre, a counseling centre and a women’s centre as well as a support centre for debtors within the walls of the Georgenhof Foundation.

Being without a confession means concretely in Blankenburg that only 11% of the population belongs to the protestant church, 3% are catholic, all the others do not belong to any church. However it shows – as described above – a development that can be found in many east German communities. People left the church as a result of antagonistic propaganda and repression or have simply stayed away and have not planted any relationship there for their children.

Additionally it has been noticed that following German reunification, the collapse of the labour market that resulted from it, and the devaluing of already earned benefits the region has fallen into such a deep depression that there is an urgent need for signs of hope and new perspectives. In this context, according to the priest-couple,

\textsuperscript{30} Böhlemann, P., Wie die Kirche wachsen kann und was sie davon abhält, Göttingen 2009, 45
\textsuperscript{31} „Gottes Gemeinde muss nicht zu allen Zeiten und an jedem Ort immer größer werden. Aber sie soll leben, denn das ist ihre Verheißung – und nicht der Tod! Sie soll leben und wachsen in allen Stücken – zu dem hin, der das Haupt ist (Eph 4,15).“ Siehe: Böhlemann, a.a.O., 14
\textsuperscript{32} Böhlemann, a.a.O., 30
even the biblical stories of salvation and those that speak of seeds and sowing gain new meaning. They offer – as does the story of the prodigal son, which describes the existence of a homeland to which one wishes to return and start over – a point of connection for similar life stories.

Here as well the priest-couple is of the conviction that the worship service in itself is not really the primary form of preaching, rather instead of preaching to those without a confession it has to be about preaching through working with them. The public and with it “those waiting at the fences” begin to have new meaning.

Yet openness comes about through community and working on relationships. Experience shows that workshops and other pedagogically oriented forms are by far more able to bring people closer to the church again or even to bring about a readiness to be baptized as is the classic worship service structure. Furthermore people who are won over this way are only occasionally and with much effort able to find their way through traditional worship services without feeling quite like foreigners in comparison to all the others. It is especially important in this work to query and sense exactly what questions people are coming with. This understanding – according to the evaluation of our staff there – thus excludes the style of preaching using the pericope order.

They further report that the way in which death and dying are dealt with is more greatly tabooed there than it is in west Germany. What is missing are both horizons that give meaning and rituals with the dead. Here again the emphasis must be to build up trust and offer comforting companionship in such a way as that it can be believed and attempted.

To avoid misunderstanding: The congregational worship service according to the usual agenda is, of course, still the main form of worship service.

**VII. Summarizing Theses**

**Thesis 1**
God has entrusted us with a message that the world needs as it strengthens those who labour and keeps the strong from thinking that a life of fulfilment is promised to those who perform and are successful.

**Thesis 2**
Congregations have to want to grow. Church wants to increase its membership and be a home for people; but it must try to do this with humility and tolerance and has a dialogical character.

**Thesis 3**
Mission is not only an object of a the church as institution; every person is Christ’s messenger wherever he or she is.

**Thesis 4**
Direct personal contact is imperative for mission
“Behave in such a way so that they ask, why do you behave so?” (Herrenhutter Instruction for missionaries in the 18th century)
Worldly life occurrences are parables for the spiritual happenings of mission and evangelisation (Jüngel):
\begin{itemize}
  \item to see and acknowledge each other,
  \item to touch each other,
  \item to eat together (bread and wine),
  \item to write letters,
  \item to talk.
\end{itemize}

Thesis 5
“The best mission the church can offer is found in the high quality of its classic activities.

Thesis 6
Church buildings must be regarded as missionary treasure.

Thesis 7
Successful missionary work can be found at the outer circle of the people’s church
- with brass bands
- choir members
- church building clubs
that is, there where people have a purposeful activity.

Thesis 8
Mission has to be newly spelled. It is not about making church members more pious but rather about discovering anew the meaning of baptism:
- the necessity of developing good baptism courses for adults
- what it means to be a godparent
- children learn from their parents
- importance of protestant preschools; Christian schools

Thesis 9
Mission without looking at congregational structures is blind. Worrying about structures without looking at the missionary intention is empty. (Chr. Kähler)
Mission and decisions about structure belong together.