Ecumenical partnerships as catalysts of renewal and transformation

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Respected delegates from EMS-Family,
Dear sisters and brothers,

As Partners in Mission in Solidarity I greet you all on behalf of the Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau (EKHN). As a representative of EKHN I gratefully acknowledge and appreciate the role played by the EMS in the development of the EKHN-Partnerships. The different seminars, workshops, projects and study programs have enriched our partnership and qualified them. A big Thank You to EMS. A big Thank You also to PROK, our ecumenical partner in South Korea for almost 35 Years.

It is a great privilege for me to talk to you about my reflections on the ecumenical partnership between the presbytery of Gwangju in the PROK and EKHN. My input will be characterized by my experiences during the last years in the area of partnership.

In his opening speech to the partnership consultation in 2017 our Church president, Rev. Dr. Volker Jung, pointed out that the idea of Partnership is deeply rooted in the constitution of EKHN. It starts with the following sentence: „The Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau is part of the one, holy, common and apostolic church of Jesus Christ, which is present there, where the word of God is purely preached and the sacraments are served in a right way… She (that means the EKHN) supports the communion of Protestant Christians in Germany and we work for the world wide unity of Christianity.“ That is the ecumenical self-understanding of the Protestant Church in Hesse and Nassau. This self-understanding paved the way for the emergence of ecumenical partnerships in the EKHN. Another incentive was the emerging idea, that as an ecumenical church we should not transfer the responsibility of ecumenical partnerships to the mission societies alone. So the EKHN decided to have direct partnership relationships, which have become an integral part of our Church.

The beginnings of EKHN-PROK partnership goes back to the days of democracy movement in South Korea. Provost Rev. Helga Trösken, who died on 1st of September this year, supported the concerns of the democracy movement when on 18th May 1980 demonstrations in the South Korean city of Gwangju were bloodily suppressed by the military dictatorship. She maintained close contacts with the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK), whose members and leadership were engaged in the democracy movement. Later, on her initiative, a partnership between the EKHN and the Gwangju Presbytery of PROK was started, as an expression of Solidarity with the people of South Korea in their yearning for democracy and human rights. Rev. Trösken took up insights of South Korean liberation theology (Minjung theology) and made it known to our Church in the eighties.

As a German Church, which had made bitter experiences under inhuman dictatorship of Nazi ideology, which had many members in the Confessing Church during the Nazi-dictatorship and as the Church of Martin Niemöller, who was one of the Co-authors of the so-called Darmstädter Wort, the EKHN sees it as important task to stand up for human rights and for freedom of speech and to express solidarity with people, who fight against dictatorships. Let us use the experiences in the partnership to overcome nationalism, racism, casteism and all forms of discrimination.
Indeed Solidarity with the people of Korea, support for democratization, peace, reconciliation and unity were important content of the partnership. Rights of Comfort women, diakonia, ecology, conscientious objection to military service were and are important topics in our partnership work.

The euphoria of the first few years is now over. A certain weariness in the partnership work has come up. There are less volunteers who come up to promote this work. Many of our congregations and deaneries are very busy with other issues such as mergers, reform processes, loss of members and are preoccupied with other current developments in the Church and society. But at the same I must admit that PROK-EKHN partnership remains a lively partnership.

And we need this partnership to open our eyes. As I observe, people in Germany are looking for comfortable corners while there are burning issues in our society and in the political field. Here we can learn from or sisters and Brothers in Korea.

We have learnt a lot from our partnerships. Through exchanges, interactions, sharing of information, joys and sorrows and through appreciating the variety of spirituality we have built up a solid fellowship. An important learning outcome is the experience of being a Christian in a different cultural and geographical context. What does it mean to be a Christian in a minority community? What does it mean to be a Christian in a multireligious context? What does it mean to be a Christian in a divided country?

In the more and more globalized world we have a lot of opportunities to live our partnership in a more active way. There are similar issues and developments in our countries. Populism is a predominant issue in many countries. Some People try to explain complicated matters and developments with simple answers. Normally these answers are not correct. We are aware of the discussions around climate change and migration. Global problems need global answers. And I think we as partners together can contribute to find answers.

One important area of ecumenical partnership is the sharing and mutually enriching in the area of spirituality. There are different initiatives in our Churches promoting spirituality and Christian life. As partners in mission let us develop strategies to encounter the challenges facing us as Churches. Let us learn from one another’s experiences on topics like, transfer of religious values to the next generation, facing problems like lose of religion, Agnosticism and Atheism. We also observe the growing exchange in the field of mission in the South (eg. Korean Missionaries working in India). How can we share our experiences and ideas in this context?

The rapid development in the area of social media and mass media offer us wonderful networks. The ongoing digitalization opens new possibilities for our communication. The digital revolution can strengthen our partnerships. With a lot self-criticism I must say there is a need to improve the communication. It is a sisterly and brotherly gesture to inform our partners about the important events, issues and developments in our Churches.

The death of Rev. Helga Trösken made me think about the future of partnership. How can we pass on the idea of partnership to the next generation? Every partnership consultation has ended up with statements stressing the need to involve youth in the partnership. But very little is happening.

We need to create open spaces, where we can talk about problems openly, respecting the respective cultural backgrounds and the theological convictions, for example on our position regarding people of other sexual orientation, like lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender
(LGBT) our understanding of Bible interpretation or mission or role of women in our Churches.

Mutual visits are an integral and an important part of Partnerships. We should in fact reflect on the role visits in the partnership. In the German Church there is an institution of “Visitation”, in which a congregation visits another congregation in a brotherly and sisterly atmosphere, in which feedbacks are made. These feedbacks have a certain binding character. I would suggest a similar structure for our Partnerships.

There is a need to broaden the basis of partnership. Let us invite others to work together. A few examples: educational institutions, universities, social and health institutions, Kindergartens, Youth groups etc. We need many pillars for the house of partnership.

We must ask the question: what do ecumenical partnerships mean for our Churches? Did we achieve the goals, which we set up? Do the insights and ideas won from the partnership have some effect on the day today life of our Churches? Did our Partnership contribute to the renewal of our congregations and our Churches? What has changed in our Church through Partnerships? What does it mean for mission and witnessing in our Churches? If we are not at all in a position to answer these questions positively it is absolute necessary to rethink and reconsider our partnership.

In this connection I would like to express my criticism to our Church. I was surprised to see that that the insights from the partnership did not have much effect on the reform process of our church, as though the so many years of ecumenical learning has not brought anything for the Church. Ecumenical partnerships must be catalysts of renewal and transformation. May this become a reality.