International Conference on Inter-Religious Study Program as a Task of the Church Today
Frankfurt, 4-6 October 2019

The above conference took place in Frankfurt, organized by EMS, EKHN, DOAM and BMW together in cooperation. The conference aimed at bringing the three study programs on interreligious learning and to bring together the faculty of these institutes and the participants to share learning outcomes and the impact the study programs has offered. And to the sending German churches and Mission societies the influence and impact these study programs has brought about by the participants.

The 3 study programs include, ISJP-Inter-religious study program in Japan, NEST-Nearest School of Theology in Beirut/Lebanon, and HMI- Henry Martin Institute for Islamic Studies, Hyderabad, India. Both students and Pastoral colleagues from EKHN participated in this program and shared their reflections and learning followed by discussion.

The conference began with greetings from Rev. Detlev Knoche, OKR, EKHN and presidium of EMS and Lutz Drescher, the chair of DOAM.

The inter-religious study program as task of the Church in Multi- Religious Societies, Experiences from India, Japan and Lebanon.
The conference organized by EKHN and EKKW, EMS, DOAM, BMW from 4-6 October 2019, at Frankfurt had 3 segments and groups.
1. The directors and faculty of the Inter-religious study programs in Japan (ISJP), Near-East Theological seminary (NEST) and Henry Martin Institute for Islamic Studies (HMI) are the 3 institutes the German churches regularly send the students to participate. Scholarship for the participants offered through the scholarship department, Bread for the World. It is also interesting to note that the Pastoral colleagues from EKHN and EKKW participate in the study programs too.

The first session brought in the course content of the study program offered by HMI-Henry Martin Institute for Islamic studies. Rev.Dr. Packiam Samuel, director HMI and Rev.Vincent Rajkumar, director CISRS who is also member of the Board of HMI. Shred their inputs on the course content. They also shared that the study program in HMI affiliated to both the University of Senate of Serampur and Moulana Asad University in Hyderabad.

The Alumni of ISJP, NEST, HMI brought in their leanings, encounter with people of other faith and cultures during the study period in Japan, India and Lebanon.

- A. ISJP faculty and director of NCC Kyoto. Dr. Miyasho, Prof. Em. Peter Knecht and Rev. Toru Akiyama, Gen.Secretary UCCJ formed the panel to share input on the content and networking of the ISJP study program. The presentation moderated by Dr. Carola Hoffmann- Richter, former Ecumenical co-worker from EMS based at Japan and worked with Borukumin community of Japan on discrimination and integration of people of all faith.

- B. ISJP panel consisting alumni, sharing their reflections and experiences on their study program in Japan, Rev. Miriam Hechler, Rev. Tobias Ecketer and M.Ed. Thomas Linke offered their insights. This panel moderated by Dr. Martin Repp, one of the founders of
ISJP study program in Japan and stands to share expertise on religions in Japan, Shintoism, Buddhism and new religions.

- The participants shared their insights in connecting and learning about the religions and faiths, which is not of their own. This they said this opportunity opened their minds and hearts to see truth and mutual respect in other faith and to learn and share better humanity and organic solidarity and fellowship of co-existence, tolerance mutuality of care for human hood.

Inputs on NEST Near-East School of Theology & SIMO, shared by Dr. Uwe Gräbe, Liaison Secretary for Near East EMS and Rev.Dr. Andreas Herrmann, Executive for Dialogue with Islam, ZOE, Frankfurt. Moderated by Rev.Detlev Knoche

a. The study content covered a period of one year and offered a possibility of networking with other denominations and groups. Although the political situation and fabric of the insecure ambience exist in Lebanon and Beirut, the study program connects the participants with vibrant engagement with the social context and wider possibility to connect and dialogue with Orthodox churches, which brings a special and divert of encounter.

Andreas Hermann shared on his and the groups’ experience of a special study program customized for the pastoral colleagues from EKHN. He shared the impact on the colleagues knowing and encountering Islam and Jewish context, their faith, belief, and doctrines. This helped many to engage and relate to the Islamic brothers and sisters who have moved into Germany for settlement. This also makes the Church a refugee and migrant’s friendly church. The process of integration has begun but the study program has helped them to facilitate this transition friendlier and with mutual respect.

b. Near-East School of Theology participants shared reflection and learning outcomes from the NEST study program. Dr. Uwe Gräbe moderated Mr. Maxmiliane Rink and Ms. Johann Anton Zieme and the session. The participants shared their joy of learning and would be delighted to go deeper into the multi-faith relationships and with greater understanding of the political context had expressed a later possibility.
The NEST study program for the pastoral colleagues has a special focus due to the experience of the colleagues and their work-related ideologies that help integrate people of other faith into the church and to journey with the migrants offering a welcome culture as a migrant friendly church.

3 Day

The Sending church of the participants and the EMS presidium who constitute the participant’s member churches of EMS and ecumenical organizations like WCC, CSIRS, EKD, Gottingen University, Japanology department Tubingen,
The conference fostered dialogue and space for the participants to share their learning outcomes and personal transformation stories and challenges during the study time at the 3 study centers.

The panel discussions brought in insights on long-term co-operations, capacity building on Inter-religious initiatives, institutional strengthening, multi-cultural and inter-cultural dialogue, participatory leanings through sharing, learning and living.

We had panel of Church leadership
And the session was moderated by Probst. Matthias Schmid

The panel shared their positive experience on sending participants from the church and informed that most of them provided opportunity to share their learning experience with congregation and that it helped the church to know the insights and transforamatory narratives they have gained. The
church felt encouraged on the outcome and would agree to continue foster such study programs and even think of expanding this need with various options.

Rev. Rieth both as president EMS as well as OKR Württemberg, assured the study program faculty the interest in continuing the study program as they are issue based for the church. Rev. Detlev as OKR of EKHN and as presidium EMS went one-step further to offer newer exploration of study programs that might benefit the church to remain contextual, relevant and dynamic. Dr. Neumann highlighted the interest of EMS on the study program and the reflections received from the participants. She also said about the alumni meetings of both ISJP and NEST that connects to review, reflect and rejuvenate the study contents.

The evaluation process initiated by EMS with Dr. Repp for ISJP study program will highlight the purpose, the experiences of the participants and assurance to the scholarship department of Bread for the World for their support to the participants. She assured the heads of the churches that EMS with purposeful dialogue with the heads and faculty of the study program institutes will remain relevant and theologically quality contented. She encouraged the study program that it is an opportunity for other members of the EMS family to take advantage of the insights of the content of the study program. She even prosed that HMI could also be considered included as newer study program.

With the presence of the Scholarship Secretary for theological studies from Bread for the world, Rev. Arion Dionisie who is responsible for offering scholarship to the participating students from Germany, expressed his gratitude, thanks to the organizers as this conference helped him to network with the alumni, and envision further steps in the coming years. Rev. Dionisie, expressed he had some special meetings and had the opportunity to listen to some of the participant’s experiences. He was willing to explore new areas of religious studies that might enrich the church at large.
The ecumenical inputs from Dr. Peniel Rajkumar, executive secretary for Inter-religious dialogue, WCC, he addressed this initiative as hospitality and how essential it is becoming in these days especially when we face so many conflicts and divisions. He said, it is also the priority of WCC and her member churches to offer mediation and new perspectives in addressing the separationist principalities and encourage the churches to see new avenue to tread on ecumenically as well as in solidarity.

Dr. Repp, reflected over the initial time when the ISJP study program felt essential and imperative for the churches to widen their horizon of human solidarity with greater understanding. To him the ISJP is a lifetime experience for the participants who never come back the way they went, but with new vision and insights seeing possibility for a new community of respect, mutuality, inclusion and journeying together amidst plurality of faith.

A cultural evening hosted by Rev.Detlev Knoche, OKR- EKHN and EKKW brought out the power of the drum and through the beating of the drum how the local people get new energy through synchronization, movement and striking of the drum. Both as ventilation and unity.

The challenge of beating the drum is both a ventilation process of releasing their pent-up feelings of pain and victimization and to release the stress of injustice and victimization. The young people often take to the drum that it gives strength and energy to the participants including priests and church people. They share these strokes with a hope to end some of the actions of marginalization and rejections.
The day ended with a time of fellowship and further discussion from the conference.

Final Round up session

The focus of this session was address the theme to explore further steps in the ecumenical context and to build networks on Inter-religious dialogue and to connect with groups and experts as a special group committed for this pluralistic cause. This sharing will also help all participants understand the Impact and future perspectives of the Interreligious study programs for German churches, Missions and the Ecumenist.

As part of the final round up panel and discussion. We had
- Rev.Dioniese Arion, Executive Secretary for Scholarship Bread for the World
- Prof. Tetsuo Miyasho, Director Inter/religious study program Japan (ISJP)
- Rev.Dr. Peniel Jesudason Rajkumar, Program Coordinator, Inter-religious dialogue and cooperation, WCC, Geneva.
- Rev.Dr. Pakiam Samuel, Director, Henry Martin Institute for Islamic studies, HMI

And the session was moderated by Rev.Solomon Benjamin, Liaison Secretary, East Asia and India EMS.
The conference highlighted that inter-religious study program are not only inter-disciplinary, but it is a spiritual quest and covenant to learn and to cultivate change for a new community. The study program tested in the grass-root context and addressed some of the crucial issues and challenges of the national context of the study program. The study also identified that it is to foster ecumenism through the lens of inter-religious engagements.

The highlights of the conference and thank you all.

**International Inter-religious study program in Frankfurt**

EMS spearheaded the discussion and allowed Martin Repp and me along with Johnny and Dr. Hermann to work out logical details of the conference. With Rev. Detlev Knoche’s intervention and encouragement, this event brought many strong opportunities for further study program.

The presentation as a team along with Rev. Reith and Rev. Knoche and Dr. Neumann, brought a strong dimension of encouragement and newer possibilities for continuing and further engagement in of the study program.

The presence of Rev. Arion, scholarship secretary for theological education, Bread for the world along with Rev. Rieth as its chairperson offered an oasis of hope in exploring new engagements like in HMI on inter-religious study in Hyderabad.

The presence of DOAM, EKHN and EMS presidium has curved out anew design for study program and offered greater hope for deep engagement in the local context of the participants of the study program and to involve, share and disseminate the experiences gained through the study program.

The participation from the head of department of Jewish studies in Gottingen University and the director of Ausbildung of EKD, Japanology Tubingen, was also a sign of network and newer relationship.

The further discussion on the possibility of HMI as a partner offering Inter-religious study program on behalf of EMS discussed in January by Rev. Detlev and Rev. Solomon Benjamin with Dr. Pakiam Samuel at HMI.
I wanted to acknowledge the sentiments of the participants of Inter-religious study program, like WCC, HMI, UCCJ, NCC, UK, German churches and EMS, BttW, EKD, DOAM, University of Gottingen, alumni of both ISJP and NEST. The engagement of the pastoral colleagues of EKHN, Tubingen department of Japanology and other institutions were encouraging and inspiring.

Solomon Benjamin, Liaison Secretary, East Asia and India, EMS. 2020 when Rev. Detlev and me have agreed to meet there before CSI Synod meeting.

Please accept thanks from my end for the efforts and presence at both at Korea as well as at the Inter-religious study program in Frankfurt in October.

Solomon Benjamin
Liaison Secretary East Asia and India, EMS. 05.11.2019