

Very much welcome in our midst at this virtual space we are sharing together from different continents: from Africa, Asia, Southern and Northern America, Europe!

We are here from so different contexts, so different experiences, but we are united, united in God's mission.

Welcome to all of you who are now gathered here in the virtual conference "Mission today". "Mission today" is the theme that captivates us because it defines us in the challenges of our churches. And because these challenges are as diverse as life on this earth today.

Nice that you are there. Across all distances and life situations, the question unites us: What are the called challenges of the 21st century? And how can we become part of God's mission in a way that our churches become relevant for the people in the midst of their needs, their hopes, their hunger for life. This is the question asked by the General Synod of the Evangelical Church of Westphalia, and this is how we ask: What does our mission as a church mean, what is our mission in an increasingly pluralistic networked world of social, religious, and environmental diversity?

And we are not asking for ourselves only. Therefore we are so thankful that you followed our invitation. Beyond boundaries of different confessions, beyond boundaries of milieus, of religious diversity with perspectives we are here which somehow couldn't be much more diverse. But it's exactly this diversity we need because God's mission is not uniform.

God's mission takes on such different forms as his love pursues people in many different ways. It seeks them out where they are. Especially where human life is injured, damaged, marginalized. There his love shines especially brightly. There it can be discovered particularly clearly - at least from God's perspective. And from there it wants to radiate to the life of all people.

Mission today:

Since some years the Westphalian church has embarked on a journey of intercultural development. Under the theme „Church and Migration“ we are asking: What does it mean to us in the 21st century to become part in God's mission, this mission which looks out and reaches out for the fullness of life to all? How can we participate and contribute to this mission? If people who arrive at the shores of Europe, driven by the hope for a life in freedom and dignity, experience arriving at Lampedusa, crowded together in boats almost unable to come over the Mediterranean Sea at any time in the danger of sinking,

traumatized by the death of their beloved one, brutally misused and excluded from the hope for a life, which we in Europe claim as ours, as if it was so normal and our possession.

Is there not a need for a mission that is fed by liberation theological impulses, if it does not want to degenerate into bourgeois self-sufficiency?

We are not asking this for ourselves alone, but with you, together with you, our partners on the ground and worldwide. And there is no other way than to focus on the great diversity that determines people's lives. And in the workshops we will explore this together with you.

Our brothers and sisters in the UEM member churches in Africa and Asia take it for granted that witnessing to God's love takes place in the liberating message and in passing on the liberating message, indissolubly linked with liberating action: both in the midst of the abysses in which people find themselves in a world torn apart by violence and injustice. Evangelization, mission, empowerment, diaconal action on the side of the marginalized... all this cannot be separated. And: it will not be separated either, because for God it belongs inseparably together.

In our country, people often experience things differently: In a society that is becoming increasingly secularized and functionally differentiated into life worlds and social systems, people experience themselves less and less as part of a firmly defined community. Digitalization opens spaces of life and orientation that are determined by individual, personal choice, fluid, not shaped by tradition, open to new forms of expression that are only beginning to emerge.

Dear sisters and brothers from all over the world and locally: your expectations for this conference are as varied as our experiences and hopes are.

We hear two expectations as representatives at the beginning. They open our circle and the worldwide perspective wide:

From the perspective of the fellowship of the United Evangelical Mission, a fellowship of 39 churches and one diaconal institution in three continents.

And then from the point of view of the very diverse international congregations in Westphalia, which have joined in the North Rhine-Westphalian International Church Convention.

Then I will introduce you to the members of our Listeners Group: people from the diversity that we are together, a reflection of it.

Representing all of us, they are listening together to the diversity of voices of this conference and bringing them into exchange with each other. And in the closing plenary of our conference tomorrow at noon, they will give us a first insight into what has become essential for them in view of our further journey after the conference, in view of our further ecumenical journey community, in which we hope to follow in the footsteps of God. Then there will be a musical interruption before we look forward to the key-note speeches on the conference theme from American, African, Asian and European perspectives.

And then you've earned a break. And after that break, it's your turn. Then it's your chance and opportunity to join the presenters in the workshops to engage in conversation on the topic that particularly touches you

Dear sisters and brothers, dear friends! This evening we will have the opportunity for informal exchanges among ourselves. And please take advantage of it in all informality. Be it at the lounge tables for conversations, be it for appointments that you make among yourselves in the chat, for one-on-one conversations completely undisturbed. Be it by rummaging in the exhibition rooms matching our workshops. Take advantage of the fact that these rooms are open for you - 24 hours if necessary - because of the time differences on the two conference days, so that you can also be in conversation with each other in Africa, Asia and America.

But now we start listening to God's word

Join me in looking forward to the opening prayer of our President, Dr. h. c. Annette Kurschus. She is joining us now.