

Learning from each other in global partnership

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Bilateral Relations or International Communion?

Six theses for ecumenical relations in globality.

The following six theses plead for the development and expansion of multilateral international connections between churches, for example in ecumenical or interreligious communities or networks. They argue strongly against regressions into bilateral connections.

1 A different worldview

"The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it;"

(Ps. 24:1).

Churches, with their understanding of ecumenism as the whole inhabited earth, and through the long history of their worldwide relationships, profess inclusive and participatory forms of globality. It is their opportunity and responsibility to publicize and promote these. With their worldwide network of congregations, churches connect people - not just special professionals among them! - in all parts of the world. Such widely ramified global connections are urgently needed today in the face of pandemic, global environmental degradation or populist regimes in all parts of the world, because they can foster new thinking in patterns of "globality" beyond old regional attributions. Bilateral relations, on the other hand, often produce one-sided classifications and allocations of certain world regions to categories such as "poor" and "rich," "perpetrators" and "victims," "powerful" and "powerless," "close to nature" and "alienated," thus creating distorting systematics and valuations that do not correspond to reality.

Instead, flexible, dynamic multilateral networks of relationships between churches and religions are needed.

2. The dominance of the north

"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;" (Mt 2:6)

The churches of Europe, through their financial and administrative structure and their highly differentiated education, congregational structure and diaconia, are "tankers" -

cumbersome but strong. Bilateralism in church relations can perpetuate Northern dominance. Many churches in the Global South are much smaller and not so fixed in their structure. However, they often have an enormous following, far more than churches in Europe, and they are crucial, often the most important, providers of health care and education in their countries. Their strengths often do not come to bear in bilateral relations and are not perceived or are perceived only in a stereotyped way ("lively church services there - financial strength here"). In conversations and relationships, the churches of the Global North almost always take dominant roles and determine discourses and programs. (Ex: the discourse around homosexuality).

In international communities, the voices of the Global South are strengthened. They can engage more effectively and authentically in discourses and actively shape them. In ecumenical communities, issues from all regions are taken up. This can also lead to conflict, but brings greater honesty to relationships.

3. Global joint cooperation

"... to work it and take care of it. " (Gen. 2:15).

Thinking in terms of "us and them" values the different perspectives and thus limits the exchange and creativity of joint work. Multilateral cooperation, on the other hand, brings together very different perspectives. It always brings out surprising and irritating dimensions of a topic and its perception. Without such moments of irritation, global cooperation is not honest. The danger in bilateral relationships is that the diversity of perspectives does not become clear because discourses are always conducted with only one partner with whom the relationship is not to be disturbed.

In international communities, it becomes the norm to deal constructively with irritations. This promotes competencies that are urgently needed today and practice in everyday global thinking and action.

4. Innovative forms of relationship

"But they had all things in common..." (Acts 2:44)

In many partnership relationships between church districts, it is visible that bilateral partners tend to lock each other into traditional roles of "giver" and "taker." Such rela-

tionships have a tendency to become cumbersome and rigid. Finding new forms is often tedious to impossible. People interested in new ways of cooperating are often not allowed inside traditional partnership relationships.

In communities, greater diversity results in new forms of relationships - e.g., networks, alliances, or thematically oriented collaborations for a specific time. They are better able to take up concrete occasions and developments, beyond immediate actions such as disaster relief.

5. Finances and their flow

"You give them something to eat." (Lk 9:13).

Finances today flow not only from the North to the South, but also from the South to the South and from the South to the North. Churches in the North must be careful not to persist in old self-images of "givers" versus "takers" - they could be badly mistaken. Real flows of money that do not go from the North to the South are often not documented in current accounting systems and thus not made known. It is different in a community. Everyone is a giver and a taker, and new forms of documentation emerge for this.

6. Focal points of Christianity

"For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the Lord's people in Jerusalem." (Rom 15:26).

Focal points of Christianity today are clearly in the Global South. Churches in the North have not yet adequately realized this. Looking at the projections of the 2019 "Freiburg Study," it is clear that churches in the North could become dependent on churches in the South for their own existence in the near future. Realizing this could become a matter of survival for the churches of the North. It is important to develop already now new, innovative forms of ecumenical relationships that reflect the realities of life of churches in the North as well as in the South, in the East as well as in the West. Restricting ourselves to bilateral North-South relations would be a step backward.