

Wibke Janssen: "Developing things together in dialogue"



An Interview with the new head of the Department Theology and Ecu-
menism of the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland

About Rev. Janssen

Dr Wibke Janssen was most recently pastor at the Archbishop's Liebfrauentempel in Bonn, skriba of the Bonn church district and chairwoman of the Rhenish church's Standing Theological Committee. The theologian was born in East Frisia. She studied in Bonn and Strasbourg (France). She did her vicariate and probationary service in congregations in Bonn and Hersel. As a pastor she was active in the areas of local congregations, student chaplaincy, hospital chaplaincy. As a research assistant for church history she worked at the universities of Bonn and Frankfurt/Main and took over a substitution of the chair for the historical dimension of theology and diaconal science in the course of studies community education and diaconia at the Protestant University of Applied Sciences Bochum.

Mrs. Janssen, are there points of contact between you and the UEM or international ecumenism in general?

Janssen: There are points of contact with international ecumenism. Institutionally, I have not yet had much to do with the UEM. But with this visit, I am beginning to pick up threads here. And I enjoyed working a lot with the materials of the UEM on human rights at school. For international ecumenism, for example, during my studies in Strasbourg I had an intensive exchange with students from francophone African countries, for example from Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso. And then in Strasbourg I found contact with the theological faculty in Amsterdam. And with them I went to the WCC (World Council of Churches) and we spent a very exciting time studying together with Mercy Amba Oduyoye, an African feminist theologian, a Methodist, who I think now lives and teaches in Ghana. Recently I have been in touch with international ecumenism through conferences on the topic of "Racism in the Church". And I experienced an informative workshop on this topic at the church morning in Solingen, with Sarah Vecera, among others. This closes the circle to the UEM. In addition, of course, there are endless points of contact about questions that move me and people around the world: "How do I experience my faith?", "How do I live it?", "What opportunities do I have?", "How does the church approach me?", "Where does it create problems for me?".

As a theologian, what does the term "mission" mean to you?

Janssen: I had to deal intensively with the term in the preparation of the ecumenical conception of the EKIR, in which I was involved. There were people who wanted to avoid the term in the text as much as possible because it had caused injustice and encroachment in the past of the church. And there were others for whom it was centrally important because it simply belonged to the church. So it's a term that demands attention and caution. I come from the idea of the *missio Dei*, in which we are involved. I hope that historically we will not only manage a further development of "mission", but a break to an understanding of mission in the sense of "We know better. I know better. German theology knows better" - that a radical change really takes place here. Being involved in God's mission to the world and at the same time also the idea that God is always already in the world and that this is a reciprocal process, this is the direction in which mission could go.

In your opinion, what is the mission of UEM in today's church landscape in Germany?

Janssen: I think it would certainly be an enormous task to create awareness - and to expand it where it is perhaps already present in the beginning - that the church and also the Protestant

church is active worldwide and that we are not just cooking in the German porridge. This is an opportunity to perceive a perspective with all the enrichments that we can experience in this breadth, with the tasks for our own justice and spiritual vitality that result from it. For me, that would first be the most important thing, from which various individual projects can then be derived.

What opportunities do you see in the future cooperation between the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland and the UEM?

Janssen: I see an opportunity in the fact that there are clearly common themes and concerns. If I take, for example, the resolution of the EKiR Synod to become a church on the path of just peace, then there are numerous cross-connections in questions of different facets of justice: for example, economic and, in connection with that, climate justice. I see a slightly different possibility in reflecting together on the concept of mission, staying awake and being inspired as EKiR, learning to be connected as brothers and sisters, discussing, taking responsibility, celebrating ...

Personally, I also think that in some ways we should seek a new theology together. As a church historian, I think that if we want to change sustainably as a church, we need a new theology. Church history shows us that otherwise it doesn't work. And in doing so, perceiving the global perspective at eye level, i.e. ecumenism, is a very decisive factor for me. And here I have the hope that we can develop things together in dialogue.

Do you also anticipate challenges in working with a mission that is an international fellowship of churches in Africa, Asia and Germany?

Janssen: Yes, I expect challenges. On the one hand, I believe that it is a perpetually difficult movement to learn in a German church, which is the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland, to actually engage in the global perspective and to really enter into dialogue, a dialogue that entails that I am willing to change and develop. From that point of view, I think this can also lead to controversial discussions. But I don't find that so dramatic if we understand ourselves as brothers and sisters from Jesus Christ. There are disputes between brothers and sisters from time to time, but they still belong together. And among the possible points of discussion, as in families, are probably also pragmatic and structural things such as finances and forms of organization.

What are you most looking forward to in your collaboration with UEM?

Janssen: Oh, there are many things I am looking forward to. First of all, I am looking forward to the General Assembly of the UEM and to getting to know many people from the cloud of witnesses of the UEM and to immerse myself in this diversity and to exchange ideas. I find that very exciting. I'm also looking forward to the archives here, I learned that today, and learning about this side of church history that is so terribly lacking in studies, training, and other contexts. And I hope that I can make my contribution to the cooperation of the EKiR with the UEM, to a common, spiritual, political, pilgrimage movement on the path of just peace.

Thank you very much for the interview!