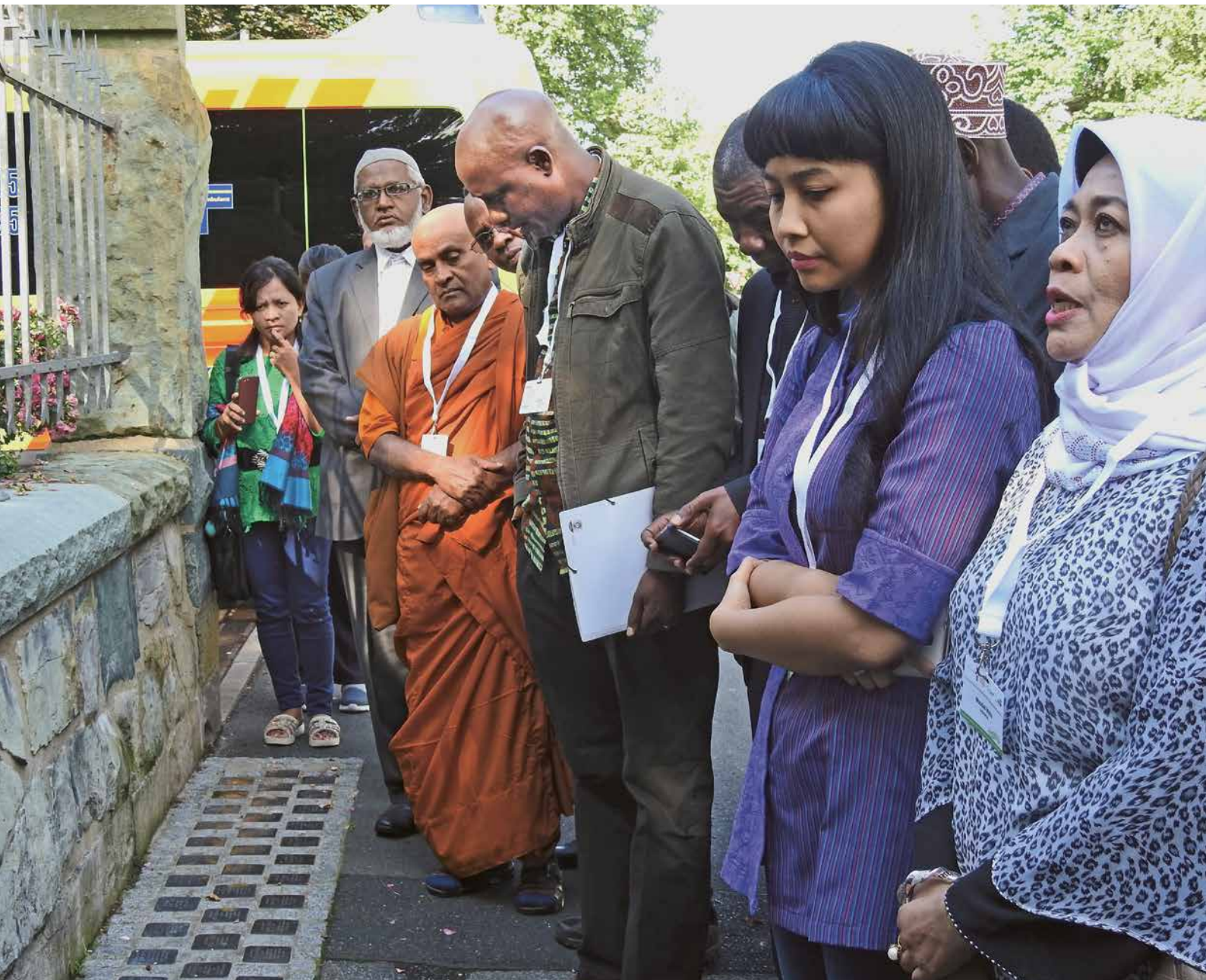


TOGETHER AGAINST EXTREMISM AND VIOLENCE



DOCUMENTATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL AND
INTERFAITH PEACE CONFERENCE 13 TO 16 JULY 2017



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➤ *Rabbi Natalia Verzhbovska in the synagogue at Unna, together with peace conference participants.*



➤ *From left: Dr Jonathan Kavusa Kivatsi, lecturer at the Congolese Université Libre des Pays des Grand Lacs; Sheik Soraga, from Zanzibar; and Archbishop Ignatius Kaigama, from Nigeria.*

FOREWORD

TOGETHER AGAINST EXTREMISM AND VIOLENCE

Together with representatives of other religious communities, UEM churches are seeking new ways to build peaceful and inclusive societies in the face of terrorism and of religious and racial violence worldwide

Jochen Motte

Over ninety representatives from churches and religious communities of Muslims and Buddhists met in Wuppertal from 13 to 16 July 2017 for a joint pilgrimage for justice and peace that was also a demonstration against extremism and religiously motivated violence. The participants came from more than twelve countries in Africa, Asia, and Europe.

During the meeting, attendees exchanged what they had learned about how to combat and overcome extremism and violence in interfaith initiatives and actions. The United Evangelical Mission was invited to the international conference, together with the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland, the Evangelical Church of Westphalia, and the Catholic organisation Justitia et Pax. Daniel Legutke, human rights officer at the Justitia et Pax German Commission, said during his introduction: "I am pleased that we have succeeded in inviting such a diverse and representative selection of important religious representatives to Wuppertal."

The German participants made clear at the beginning of the conference that churches and church organisations had failed to prevent extremist and racist ideologies during the era of National Socialism. More than six million Jews were murdered, as were members of other minorities and various political parties. The Second World War took the lives of 56 million people, directly or indirectly. It is against the back-

ground of this very experience that the UEM, the Rhenish and Westphalian churches, and Justitia et Pax consider it their duty to oppose all current forms of racism, intolerance, discrimination, extremism, and violence, as well as xenophobia and state-sponsored terrorism.

As Annette Muhr-Nelson, Head of the Institute for Mission, Ecumenical Affairs and Global Responsibility (MÖWe) of the Westphalian Church, put it: "When we talk about religion and the role of the state, we can still call upon the Barmen Declaration of 1934 of the Confessing Church as fundamental to Christian action, to courageously oppose any appropriation of the Church by the State. The Christian message is never serviceable to the state."

The recent terrorist attacks in Europe have been a wake-up call and a cause for bewilderment: 86 people killed in Nice in July 2015, 12 in Berlin in December 2016, 19 in Manchester in May 2017, and 7 in London in June 2017. Less well-known is the lamentable fact that the largest number of victims of attacks are in countries that are not part of what we consider as the West. According to the Global Terrorism Index, 72 per cent of all people who have lost their lives in terrorist attacks come from 5 countries: Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Syria. In 2014, 32,765 people worldwide were killed in terrorist attacks.

Members of various religious groups have been affected by intolerance and violence in all parts of the world – including in Germany, where 112 attacks on churches and mosques were documented between 2014 and 2016 in the federal states of Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, and Thuringia alone.

Whereas the media reports extensively on terrorist attacks motivated by religious extremism, scarcely any public attention is paid to those in many countries such as Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Nigeria, Tanzania, and even Germany who have spent many years committed to interfaith networks for peaceful and inclusive communities and societies at the local and regional level.

The conference in Wuppertal was an opportunity to give people renewed strength in their work and each other, people who champion tolerance and peace and must sometimes put up with hostility from their own religious communities. By exchanging their experiences, they were able to give each other new stimuli and incentives to take with them on the path. The non-European guests in particular appreciated the visits to synagogues, churches, and mosques in Unna-Massen and Duisburg-Marxloh before the beginning of the conference. Church Councillor Rafael Nikodemus, a specialist in Christian-Muslim dialogue from the Rhenish Church, had this to say on the first day of the conference: “In a globalized world, religion and religions have an active role to play: to bring about peace, create justice, preserve creation, and defend the dignity of humanity.”

In a joint statement, (www.vemission.org), the participants in the conference condemned any form of violence in the name of religion. They pledged to advocate for tolerance and dialogue, and to build relationships between people of different faith communities in order to work together to build peaceful and inclusive societies. Stories, experiences, and stimuli from the conference are documented in this journal. In the coming years, the statements from the participants will provide the foundation for further work on the theme of “Peace Among Peoples – Interfaith Advocacy for Peace and Justice”.

In September 2017, the regional assembly of the Asian member churches of the UEM took place in the Philippines province of Cavite. The assembled church representatives unanimously decided to propose the theme of extremism and violence as a key theme of the UEM General Assembly for the next four years.

Following the meeting, 25 participants gained practical experience in advocating for justice and peace. In a two-week course, they became acquainted with methods of peaceful conflict resolution and mediation and learned about the instruments and methods of international human rights protection. With these and other educational offers, the UEM wants to empower people in peace and justice work, provide them with international networking opportunities, and motivate them to collaborate. Let this be a contribution to implementing the recommendations from the conference.

Dr Jochen Motte is a human rights expert and member of the UEM Management Team.



JOINT MESSAGE OF HOPE AND PEACE: "PEACE AMONG THE PEOPLE – INTERRELIGIOUS ACTION FOR PEACE AND INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES" INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE AT WUPPERTAL, GERMANY, JULY 13–16, 2017

We, more than 80 participants of the conference, leaders of different religions – Christians, Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims – as well as delegates of religious communities from 13 countries¹ came together at the Protestant Conference Centre in Wuppertal to discuss "Peace among the People – Interreligious Action for Peace and Inclusive Communities". As people of different faiths, together we have experienced:

The Spirit of God (Buddhist: Dhamma) unites us, and enables our common witness. With gratitude, we confess: Gods Spirit of Love (Buddhist: Dhamma) to all people and the entire creation surpasses all that may separate us from each other.

The Spirit of God (Buddhist: Dhamma) has the power to renew and to transform our own lives and our religious communities. It calls us and empowers us, together to overcome violence and to live out potentials for peace in our respective religions, nurturing a society without exclusion.

We have shared positive examples of interreligious encounter and cooperation. They underline our hope and confidence: Suffering, injustice and violence are neither people's fate nor God's (Buddhist: Dhamma) will. This affirms our determination not to give up, even when confronted with the suffering of so many people all over the world, due to

- increasing extremism, racism, violence and war
- increase of poverty and exploitation
- corruption and misuse of political and economic power
- abuse of religion for political purposes, legitimizing violence and exclusion

Amongst us it has been shared that in certain countries and contexts

- blasphemy laws are still applied and victimize many people
- there is the need for a just system of power sharing between all the communities.
- we are facing movements, ready to spread xenophobia and to attack refugee homes and mosques, churches, synagogues and other places of worship
- our common concern is that Government, Religious Leaders and citizens together reject any form of violence in the name of religion

- there is the need to address various religious agitations, generated by inequitable distribution of resources and perceived political marginalization

Trusting in the reconciling, transforming and encouraging power of God (Buddhist: Dhamma), we return to our respective faith communities, countries and contexts, committing ourselves to the following:

- We treat the religious convictions of others with respect and speak about each other in a positive and peace-building way. We resist those who discriminate, condemn or persecute people because of their faith, conviction, gender and orientation.
- We encourage crossing of borders between people of different religions and cultures by encounter and dialogue and bridge building.
- We commit ourselves to promote education and knowledge about the different faiths and the competence in order to empower the members of different faith communities, especially young people, together to work for peace.
- We commit ourselves to continue our dialogue and practical cooperation for peace and justice within and beyond our respective contexts.
- Based on our spiritual resources, we will contribute to the transformation of our societies towards inclusive communities, embracing diversity, gender justice and caring for the integrity of creation.
- We spare no effort to contribute to overcome poverty and exploitation. We promote fair trade and sustainable development. We struggle against the causes of forced migration.
- We remind all religious leaders and politicians of their duty to create peace and justice.
- We remind the media of their responsibility not to fuel prejudices and hate.

The Spirit of God (Buddhist: Dhamma) calls our Religions to walk hand in hand and to work together as beacon of Hope and Peace. Grateful for the common call we have heard and for the communion we have experienced, we will build up structures of networking to continue our common interreligious journey for Peace and Inclusive Communities.

Wuppertal, July 16, 2017

¹ Democratic Republic of Congo, Germany, Ghana, Indonesia, Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Uganda.



RESISTING ANY FORM OF EXTREMISM

Volker Martin Dally

“Christian Faith and Extremism: Hate that Pours out of Pews” – this was the headline of a report on the radio asserting that extremism is unfortunately to be found in the church as well as in society, although this neither could nor should be God’s will. “We’ve been experiencing this here in Dresden in dialogue forums at the Kreuzkirche, where five hundred people will be sitting in the Kreuzkirche and sometimes the sheer hatred may as well be spilling out of the pews. Refugees are never spoken of; the talk is only about internal security and what people feel, people’s felt perceptions about foreign infiltration and excessive demands.”*

The recent election results in Europe and Germany are a frightening demonstration of how extremism has found its way into the everyday life of our society. It is becoming increasingly clear that what we are happy to attribute to others is all around us: intolerance, misanthropy, ignorance, and contemptuous hatred. In German history, we had to experience this bitterly, with millions of victims of the National Socialist regime of terror. It is completely incomprehensible that some here still cannot be taught. Sadly, examples of extremist sentiments abound in the history of the mission as well. The UEM and its international members strive for enlightenment on this subject in terms of common learning, so that such a thing can never happen again. The UEM Study Process on southern Africa is one example.

But other members of the UEM, such as the churches in Rwanda, are analysing their part in the crimes of the recent past, the 1994 genocide, to find paths to reconciliation and to take action so that such atrocities (in such a horrifying conflict) never recur.

In Wuppertal, we at the United Evangelical Mission have been able to create meeting spaces that resisted any form of extremism in words and, in common life for a limited time, showed what it means to discuss, celebrate, and live for one another in the love of our living God. These spaces have included the international and interfaith peace conference, the summer school for conflict resolution, and the joint meeting of Christians and Muslims from all three regions of the UEM on mission and da’wa. Asia and Africa have hosted similar programmes for their respective regions. These have constituted powerful signs and ways of overcoming extremism that the participants took back with them to the sites to which God had called them. Let us be courageous together and set ourselves against all extremist thoughts and actions, in the name of Jesus Christ.

Volker Martin Dally is General Secretary of the UEM.

*Friedemann Bringt, of the Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Kirche und Rechtsextremismus (National Association Church and Right-Wing Extremism, BAG K+R); quoted in: http://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/christlicher-glaube-und-extremismus-hass-der-aus.1278.de.html?dram:article_id=353545 (accessed 2 November 2017)

PROFILE: FADHIL SULEIMAN SORAGA

"I AM A VICTIM OF PEACE"

SHEIKH SORAGA TAKES A STAND FOR A TOLERANT ISLAM

Sheikh Fadhil Suleiman Soraga offered an impressive example of the quest for peace among religions at the international peace conference. As the victim of an attack by extremists, he personally witnessed the conflict between moderate and militant Muslims on the island of Zanzibar.

Marion Unger

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"I am a victim of peace." This is how Sheikh Soraga describes his life, the documentation of his words evident in his appearance. Soraga is secretary to the Mufti, making him a leader of the Muslim scribes on the island of Zanzibar, off the coast of Tanzania. He was attacked with acid in 2013 because of his advocacy for a tolerant Islam. With his disfigured face and body, he has not given up, but is taking a stand for tolerance and peaceful coexistence among the religions in Africa.

His story is touching. You can hear a pin drop when he recounts it at meetings, so attentive is his audience. He describes how he started out on his daily jog one day after morning prayers. A man came up to him and threw acid in his face. His eyes, neck, and upper body were seriously injured, and he had to undergo several surgeries.

"Those who wield violence in the name of religion lack not only humanism and compassion, but also sufficient knowledge of that religion", Soraga points out. This is why he does

not tire of fighting religious extremism in his country. As Soraga tells it, the trouble began in the late 1980s and reached its peak in 2012. "We are not completely without blame for this development", he remarks, self-critically. "We sent our students to study in Saudi Arabia or the Emirates, and they came back with radical ideas." As teachers of the Qur'an, the young people passed on this thinking, and many people reflexively adopted it.

In his eyes, Soraga sees the cause of these teachers' actions not only in a biased interpretation of certain texts of the Qur'an, but also in a personal predisposition to violence. "Some of them teach their students martial arts", he reports. "They have great success with their young students, who then refer back to what their teachers have taught them." For this reason, he now devotes all of his attention to training imams and teachers. "Combating extremism is and remains our sincere goal", he emphasizes.

Sheikh Soraga is not the only victim of the killings and acid attacks in Zanzibar, where the percentage of Muslims in the population is estimated to be 99 per cent. At the height of the outbreak of violence against religious leaders in 2012, extremists shot and killed a Catholic priest. At the time, Christian churches and prominent Muslim citizens expressed their concern about the wave of religious violence, especially since

the attacks could not be solved even after years of investigation by the police and had yet to be brought before a court. The government is also making little progress in prosecuting open cases of attacks on religious facilities.

The leaders of various religious communities are in constant communication about the developments in Zanzibar. The Zanzibar Interfaith Committee, which brings together leaders of Christian and Muslim churches, mosques, and educational establishments, as well as government officials, hosted a

workshop in 2015. The committee urged religious leaders to advocate for peace. There was to be a referendum to amend the constitution, but the plans were later postponed.

“I would like for Zanzibar to become a champion of tolerance and interfaith cooperation”, says Soraga, an avowed football fan. This is the reason he never tires of taking a stand for education and religious training – despite all the resistance and risk he faces. Peace between religions is possible, he says: “After all, we are all children of Abraham.”



► In conversation: Pastor Lusungu Mbilinyi, Sheik Fadhil Suleiman Soraga, and Pastor Ipyana Mwamugobole, UEM tutor for ecumenical education (from left).



➤ Guided tour through the quarter.

"A WONDERFUL MIXTURE OF PEOPLE IN MARXLOH"

The social-pastoral Petershof centre fights against prejudices and advocates for peace and tolerance in the social tinderbox of Duisburg-Marxloh

Marion Unger

When the Church of St Peter and Paul in Duisburg-Marxloh was slated to close, resistance came from an unexpected source. The community of Muslims in the north of the city protested to the bishop about the plans to give up the worship site. The Essen diocese wanted to close this house of prayer, like so many other Catholic churches, in favour of centralizing worship services. Sister Ursula Preußner diplomatically describes the process as having been "a new experience for the bishop". As a matter of fact, the bishop would be astonished at the commitment of the Muslims to preserving a Catholic church. "St Peter and Paul is an essential part of this neighbourhood for them", explains Sister Ursula, describing the approach as a sign of the vibrant community of people in Marxloh.

That was in 2012. Since then, the church has been the heart of a social-pastoral centre known as Petershof. Duisburg-Marxloh, a "neighbourhood in special need of renewal", as it is euphemistically called in bureaucratic language, has for many years been marked by uncontrolled radicalism and unresolved social problems. The media has dubbed the neighbourhood a "no-go area", where German citizens supposedly fear to tread after dark. This is not to understate the problems, such as the local residents' fear of crime, but the Petershof centre is confronting these challenges.

"Since its founding, the Petershof centre has been trying to bring all the various groups in Marxloh to the table together", explains Father Oliver Potschien, who refuses to accept the

➤ Merkez Mosque in Duisburg.

➤ Group work in the training centre of the mosque.





▶ *Pastor Sören Asmus, department for interreligious and intercultural dialogue of the Duisburg Evangelical Church District, and Hülya Ceylan, member of the mosque board, welcome the peace conference participants.*

neighbourhood's bad reputation. "This is not social-romantic nonsense, but the consistent continuation of lessons learned here in the Ruhr area." As he describes it, people have been coming here for 150 years from all possible countries and regions, in search of a better life. Together with Sister Ursula Preußner, Piotsch directs the centre, which serves as a help point for some thousand people a week. About 150 men, women, and young people volunteer at Petershof. The centre is highly appreciated by the residents: you can tell from the many donations such as clothing, nappies, baby food, and household goods that come in every day.

In the words of Sister Ursula, the "wonderful mix of people in Marxloh" is a rainbow. All skin colours, cultures, and an extraordinarily many nationalities are represented. Migrants from Africa cooperate with Germans of Turkish origin, ethnic Germans from Russia work with ancestral Duisburgers and Roma families. There are contact points for Romanian, German, Bulgarian, and Arab youth, various leisure activities, and an African community whose choir enjoys great popularity.

The Petershof website includes a long list of offers, from the clothing-donation room to the social counselling offered to women and families; from pregnancy counselling to German courses in three different languages; and from various sport activities to midday meals. Alongside this are classic church

congregation activities like liturgical readings and altar servers, children's church, women's groups, and church music. There is even a group for Carnival, the "Petershofengel", and a small petting zoo. "Sometimes you need to have the courage to do mad things if it helps people", says Sister Ursula. The fact that refugees have also been accommodated here follows logically from the concept. By July 2017, twelve refugees were living in the nuns' quarters. The staff are still taking care of eight of them at present.

The Petershof centre takes its open-door policy literally: the front entrance is always open, offering a clear view of the high altar from the street. This makes the principles of the work transparent: the people here see themselves as a community on a path. As part of their diaconal ministry, they care for their neighbours, testify to the hope they bear, and celebrate their faith, for example with interfaith prayer in the church. So it was only natural that the Catholic congregation here supported the construction of the mosque in Duisburg-Marxloh.

Information about Petershof on the Internet is at www.peter-und-paul-marxloh.de



► The small *Stolpersteine* (tripping stones) embedded in the ground commemorate those who fell victim to National Socialism.

"TO BREAK DOWN WALLS AND BOUNDARIES IN PEOPLE'S MINDS, AND OPEN THEIR HEARTS TO ONE ANOTHER"

The Jewish community in Unna supports interfaith dialogue and peaceful coexistence

Katrin Burgdorf

Anti-Semitism is regaining strength in Germany and is increasingly disrupting the social peace. Citizens of the Jewish faith are being verbally abused and violently attacked. There have been cases of men being beaten up in the street because the traditional *kipot* on their heads made them recognizable as Jews. In this climate, the Jewish community of haKochaw in Unna, Westphalia perseveres in its efforts for interfaith dialogue and peaceful coexistence.

Two women are strongly committed to the cause: Chair Alexandra Khariakova and Rabbi Natalia Verzhbovska. Together, they are campaigning "to break down walls and boundaries in people's minds and open their hearts to one another", as Khariakova explains. Just recently, the community hosted a Sukkot celebration, the Feast of Tabernacles, in collaboration with the chair of the Integration Council in Unna. The vibrant response showed how seamlessly haKochaw's members are integrated into the social fabric.

Founded in 2007, the community is part of the Union of Progressive Jews in Germany; 26 Jewish communities in the country belong to this umbrella association, with its head office in Bielefeld. After some initial wanderings, haKochaw found a home ten years ago in a former Protestant church with the help of the Unna parish, and converted the space

into a community centre and synagogue. For Khariakova, there was no question that the community she helped to found would be part of liberal Judaism. Unlike in the majority Orthodox communities founded in the 1990s by immigrants to Germany from the former Soviet Union, men and women are not segregated during worship here, and women are active participants in services. "I can't fight for women's rights in front of the synagogue and lead a different life behind closed doors", Khariakova says. "I want to be called to read from the Torah just like a man."

With this in mind, it was only logical that the community decided on a woman rabbi; they are still extremely rare. Natalia Verzhbovska has only six women peers in Germany: "Liberal Judaism is not Judaism-lite", she emphasizes. She is involved with opposing the new anti-Semitism in a variety of ways, but she also combats anti-Islamism, whether in Christian-Jewish conferences, in the Council of Religions, or as part of her lectures at the university. As she puts it, "Without peace, we cannot really evolve."

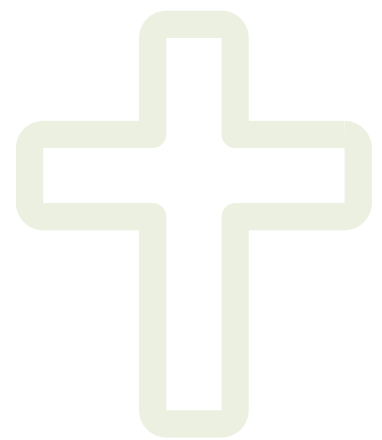




▶ *Pastor Jérôme Bizimana Nkumbuyinka, superintendent of Remera (Presbyterian Church of Rwanda).*

A SPECIAL KIND OF TRIAD IN DUISBURG'S MARXLOH DISTRICT

Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant communities working together



Katrin Burgdorf

There's a special kind of triad here in the Duisburg district of Marxloh, where the minaret of the Merkez Mosque and the steeple of the Catholic Church of St Peter and Paul salute each other across an open field. The Protestant church is also present, a short distance away.

"The open field is the bridge we want to build to each other", says Hülya Ceylan, a member of the mosque's board. The inter-religious relationship here, in which the Jewish community is also involved, is an example of a constantly evolving interfaith dialogue.

The Christian congregations were supporting the construction of the DITIB Merkez Mosque before it had even started. The planning involved the senior mayor, as well as an advisory board with representatives from the Protestant and Catholic communities, the Jewish community of Duisburg-Mülheim / Ruhr-Oberhausen, and the schools. The entire neighbourhood celebrated the opening of the mosque in 2008, with its educational facility and meeting centre. Ceylan proudly describes the Muslim community as "unique in Europe".

Rev. Sören Asmus stresses that "the planning and construction of the Merkez Mosque in Marxloh was an important stimulus for the neighbourhood". Asmus champions the co-

existence of different religions and cultures at the Department of Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue of the Duisburg Evangelical Church District. "On the initiative of the Muslim community, the Catholic and Protestant communities and the Jewish community have helped to create mutual trust and have since been working towards the goal of collaborating as equals."

The representatives from the different communities cooperated on the concept of the mosque. Four recommendations were implemented as part of their work together: The building complex has three different entrances. The main entrance leads to the prayer hall, while another entrance opens on a bistro, and the meeting centre is accessible from the street. "No one in the neighbourhood opposed the construction of a minaret", reports Ceylan, "but we refrain from having the muezzin make a public call to prayer: he can only be heard from inside". In contrast to other mosques, the windows here are clear and easy to see through, to demonstrate transparency. And one more thing: women are not required to wear headscarves inside the mosque unless they wish to.

A "round table on religions in Duisburg" and a jointly conceived "Prayer for Peace of the Religions" are now an integral part of everyday life for the people from many different cultures who call Duisburg-Marxloh home.



SRI LANKA: A CLIMATE OF MUTUAL SUSPICION AND MISTRUST

Although Buddhism is considered a religion of peace, Hindus, Christians, and Muslims are being attacked in Buddhist countries such as Sri Lanka

Religious leaders must actively oppose violence and advocate for peace

Katrin Burgdorf

Acts of violence in the name of religion show a different face of a Buddhism considered to be peaceful. Hindus, Christians, and Muslims in Sri Lanka are being verbally abused or attacked by Buddhist monks, and the Rohingya minority is being driven out of Myanmar. The head of a Buddhist monastery in Colombo who took part in the UEM international conference, "Peace Among the People", sketched a picture of the religiously motivated conflicts in Sri Lanka.

The understanding of religion today is characterized by a patchwork kind of belief. Many people seek out elements from the world religions that especially appeal to them and make them their own. Buddhism is a particularly sympa-

thetic case: the Dalai Lama, as a leading figure, is revered as a celebrity, and when personalities like actor Richard Gere cross over to Buddhism, it triggers a wave of conversions.

Those inclined towards Buddhism usually justify it with the assertion that it is the most peaceful religion in the world. This conception can be traced back to the beginning of the religion, when Buddhism spread peacefully based on the principle of the avoidance of suffering. This makes the violent currents coming out of the Buddhist monasteries in places like Sri Lanka and Myanmar all the more disturbing. In Burma, for example, the image of Nobel Peace Prize laureate and de facto leader of the current government Aung San Suu Kyi has been massively damaged by the brutal per-

secution and expulsion of the Rohingya Muslim minority. Little is left of the peaceful impression of the “Saffron Revolution”, when Buddhist monks, in their saffron robes, stood up against the military dictatorship.

“The extremists pretend they are the liberators of the religion”, explains Dr Ven Madampagama Assaji Thero, head of the Buddhist temple of Sri Isipathanaramaya in Colombo. “But this contradicts the core of Buddhist doctrine.” Buddhists respect all beings as equals, all people as worthy, regardless of race or social status. As spokesman for the Sri Lanka Environmental Congress, Dr Assaji is a prominent figure involved in peace and reconciliation initiatives. He also works to find and defuse the mines from the civil war that are still hidden throughout the country.

As a respected religious leader, he is opposed to the unholy alliance that members of his religion have entered into with Sinhalese nationalists. The violence often targets other ethnic groups in the name of religion – especially the Tamil minority in Sri Lanka, who are mostly Hindu. The head of the monastery in Colombo, which is considered an important spiritual centre, knows about the problems in Sri Lanka that have been caused by extremism in the guise of religion. He divides the monastic community into three branches: “There are many who encourage extremism, others who combat it, and a greater number who keep silent about it.” Together with politicians, the first group is working to change the country’s constitution, with the objective of codifying the preeminent position of Buddhism in the state.

This is constantly accompanied by targeted attacks on Christian churches or mosques, even though religious freedom is expressly anchored in the constitution. Christians are impeded from constructing or expanding churches. Only a few months ago, twelve men, led by a monk, attacked a Christian congregation with iron rods and destroyed the small church. The names of the perpetrators are known, but there has been no investigation by the police, let alone a court hearing.



➤ *Dr Ven Madampagama Assaji Thero (right) and Dr Jonathan Kavusa Kivatsi, lecturer at the Congolese Université Libre des Pays des Grand Lacs.*

Protestant Christians, such as those in congregations belonging to the Methodist Church in Sri Lanka (a UEM member), are often targets of similar attacks. Those who convert from Buddhism to Christianity face particular difficulty. “People who are baptized are considered traitors”, notes Dr Assaji. “There is a climate of mutual suspicion and mistrust, and these converts must tolerate verbal and physical attacks. The society in Sri Lanka is divided, and we as religious leaders must actively advocate against violence and for peace.”



► *Annette Kurschus, head of the Westphalian Church, and Dr Jochen Motte, member of the UEM board.*

GREAT TRUST IN THE POWER OF GOD

Annette Kurschus comments on religions' responsibility for peace

Marion Unger

“There are always people who practise violence, bring death, and sow war. They are not inherently religions, holy books, or individual verses.” Annette Kurschus began her remarks at the UEM peace conference with this comment on religions' shared responsibility for peace.

Referring to her own faith's tradition of a large Protestant church, the president of the Evangelical Church of Westphalia and deputy chair of the EKD asked how to better satisfy the covenant of peace inherent in the Christian faith. She pointed out the connection between peace and righteousness, between strife and material inequality, as well as the momentum of violence and its power to escalate. In her view, the heart of what religions can do for peace lies in “strengthening the human longing for peace and hope, for love and righteousness, through connection to God.”

“Around the world, we see that violence and terrorism are religiously motivated”, the president said. For this reason, she went on, one could not speak of religion at present as a force

for peace without being confronted with its weakness at forging peace, and even more with its force for violence. “Politically motivated groups understand how to exploit violent religious fundamentalists for their own ends”, Kurschus said. Right now, we are seeing how European politics and media are classifying religions as a problem for peace. At the same time, however, the peace potential of faith is being rediscovered, its power of reconciliation.

Part of religions' responsibility for peace is to be aware of the danger inherent in faith. As Kurschus emphasized, “I am convinced that wherever faith does this, it will not lose God and will hold on to its own humanity in the process.” Conversely, she asserted, religions have a duty to remind politicians, society, and industry of their responsibility for peace, in the name of humanity: “This includes courage and humility, reason and experience. Last but not least, it includes great trust in the power of God to move hearts and minds and hands.”

"GOD'S COMMANDMENTS ARE AN OFFERING, SUCH THAT LIFE AND PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE MAY SUCCEED"

Praeses Manfred Rekowski on the relationship between religion and the state

Marion Unger

// Religion has become the centre of the conversation." With these words, the president of the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland, Manfred Rekowski, began his reflections on the relationship between religion and the state at the UEM international peace conference. Using the fifth thesis of the Barmen Theological Declaration as a basis, Rekowski developed his views on the role of both elements in our society.

In 1934, the Confessional Synod in Barmen formulated its theological declaration in six theses. The declaration originated in the church opposition to Hitler, and to this day still points the way, from a Christian perspective, to determining the relationship of religion and politics. In the fifth thesis of the declaration, "in the as yet unredeemed world in which the Church also exists", the state is granted a monopoly on violence to ensure peace and justice. At the same time, the text recalls "God's commandment and righteousness" and with it the responsibility of the ruling and the ruled.

But the Barmen Declaration also sets limits on the church: as Praeses Rekowski stressed, "religion and the church do not take over the worldly government – aspiring to a theocracy

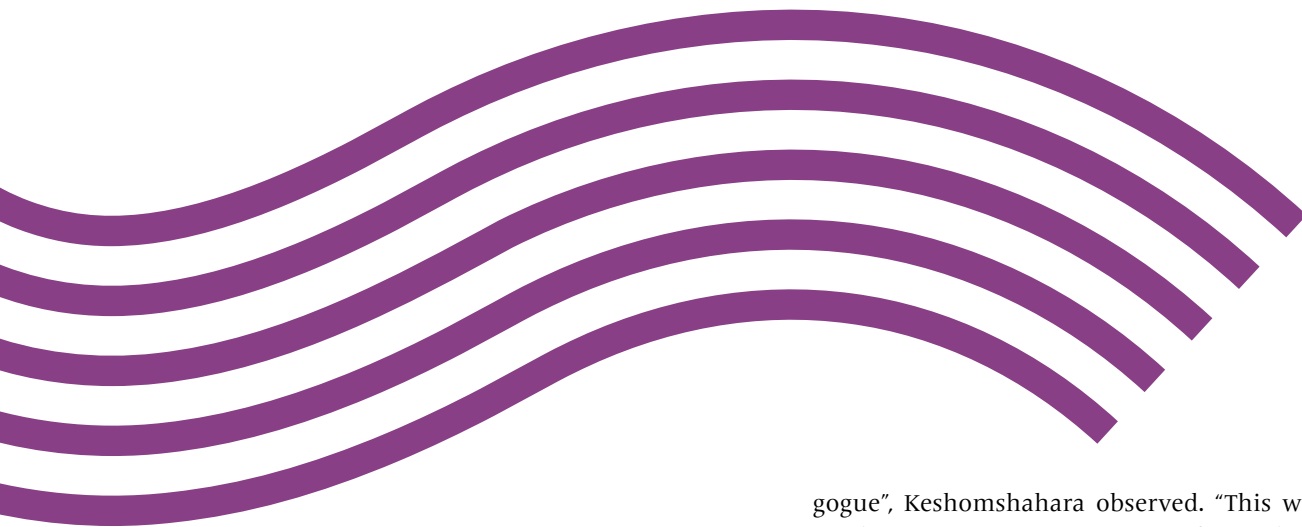
is unimaginable". Wherever such a thing is attempted, sooner or later a "hell on earth" will arise. This is a lesson experienced across religions, he said. The church enters the public discourse in an ideologically neutral state and a plural society precisely by recalling God's kingdom, God's commandments, and God's righteousness: "God's kingdom is the alternative to the existing conditions, God's commandments are an offering, such that life and peaceful coexistence may succeed".

Alluding to calls for churches to focus more strongly on their core issues such as pastoral care, teaching, and diaconia instead of interfering in the politics of the day, the president underscored that the Christian churches would not permit abuses by the state. He added: "And we will massively object if, in asylum proceedings, the state tries to verify whether refugees have been baptized for the sake of their beliefs. This is the duty not of the state, but of the churches."

► Manfred Rekowski, head of the Rhenish Church (middle); Annette Muhr-Nelson, head of the Institute for Mission, Ecumenical Affairs and Global Responsibility (MÖWe); and Alex Malasusa, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania.



A CONVERSATION WITH ABEDNEGO KESHOMSHAHARA, BISHOP OF THE NORTHWEST DIOCESE OF THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN TANZANIA



Marion Unger

“People of various religions met together, dined together, discussed together, and self-critically looked at their own challenges together.” In the eyes of Abednego Keshomshahara, Bishop of the Northwestern Diocese of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania, this was the biggest benefit of the international conference, “Peace among the People”. Keshomshahara’s summary of the experience of being together was positive overall, even though the conference included critical questions about how the different religions related to one another.

Aside from the scientific input, the bishop was particularly appreciative of the practical examples from all three regions of the UEM of people of different faiths living in harmony together. “It was good that we not only had theoretical discussions, but also visited a church, a mosque, and a syna-

gogue”, Keshomshahara observed. “This way I perceived Muslims in Germany not just as refugees, but as long-established citizens.” As he sees it, the churches have made a special contribution to spreading the message of a welcoming German culture to the world.

He noted that the interfaith social work at the Petershof centre in Duisburg-Marxloh had commanded his respect. “In some countries, Muslims burn down churches – here they fought to preserve a church in their neighbourhood”, he explained. “This example could be helpful for Muslims abroad.” In his opinion, this shows the power of religion to bring peace to people’s everyday lives.

It is precisely this power that he sees evolving in Sri Lanka, even though Buddhism and Christianity do not co-exist peacefully everywhere. The Tanzania bishop followed the account of Buddhist monk Dr Ven Madampagama Assaji Thero with great interest: “It was illuminating for me to hear that the government in Sri Lanka seems to be afraid of doing something against the will of the Buddhist clergy, and that some radically minded monks are suppressing the Christian



➤ *Dr Abednego Keshomshahara*

minority”, Keshomshahara said. He was all the more impressed at Dr Assaji Thero’s peace work, which has strengthened more moderate forces and champions the peaceful co-existence of people of different religions in Sri Lanka. “Religion has the power to mediate when politics fail”, he asserted. “This is how peace can be maintained.”

The bishop brings with him a wealth of experience from interfaith communities in his own country. For example, there have been numerous family ties between Christians and Muslims in Tanzania for many years. “People from the same tribe often belong to different religions”, he explained. “In some families, the father will be Christian, and one son will be too, whereas his brother will be Muslim and the sister will be married to a Muslim.” They celebrate marriages, baptisms or circumcisions together, and each will attend the funeral rites of the other’s religion. As Keshomshahara puts it: “As we live together, so do we die together.”

What is a matter of course in the interior of the country, however, frequently leads to conflicts in the larger cities of the coastal region, and especially on the island of Zanzibar.

Radical Muslims are gaining influence in these places, bringing ideas to Tanzania from countries like Saudi Arabia and promoting a conservative, less tolerant Islam.

However, the bishop remarked self-critically, there are also projects in Tanzania that are basically still in their infancy. One failed initiative involved women from Christian congregations inviting Muslim women to cook and eat with them. “If the women from the mosque do the cooking, it works well; if the Christians issue the invitation, the Muslim women do not come”, is how Keshomshahara described the difficulties, which he ascribed to a certain mistrust in the Muslim dietary requirements being maintained. “This is really too bad, and it constitutes a step backwards; it’s like a one-sided mental wall.”

Bishop Keshomshahara expressed his hopes that interfaith dialogue in a framework like the peace conference would continue. He stressed how important it is “that we understand each other more deeply and join with the more moderate forces to combat radicalism”.

PILGRIMAGE FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE

Marion Unger

At the close of the international peace conference, the participants embarked on a pilgrimage for justice and peace. The pilgrimage path included sites in Wuppertal of current and historical importance.

A good relationship between the various denominations and religions has shaped life in this western German city from time immemorial. The reason behind the peaceful relations is the immigration of people of different faiths over hundreds of years, beginning with the industrialization of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As a present-day example, today thirty thousand Muslims live in Wuppertal, and the Jewish community has found a new home around the new Bergische Synagogue.

Soon, for the first time in Germany, a burial ground will be built where citizens from the Muslim, Jewish, and Christian faiths can rest in peace together. The planned site is directly adjacent to a Jewish and a Christian cemetery. Mohamed Abodahab, the chair of the “Islam und Frieden in Wuppertal” association (“Islam and Peace in Wuppertal”), describes the project as “an example of successful integration beyond life in this world”.

The Protestant church district in Wuppertal provided the land for the cemetery. The design process is set to begin soon, with the collaboration of the landscape architecture department of the Bergische Universität Wuppertal. It has been a long road to reach this point. Finally, after many discussions with the neighbours of the future interfaith cemetery and a change in the funeral laws of North Rhine-Westphalia, the goal is in sight. “We can bury our dead here according to Muslim tradition”, explains Abodahab.

The pleasant climate among the religions in the city was not the only theme of the pilgrimage. The correlations between the flourishing capitalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the social situation in Germany were unmistakable. The pilgrims learned a lot about the civic commitment to fighting poverty and injustice, as they saw from their visits to the listed building of the “Vorwärts-Befreiung” retail cooperative and the “statue of poverty” in front of the Protestant Citykirche. The pilgrimage ended with an interfaith prayer based on the Golden Rule, the foundation of ethical behaviour that is present in the holy texts of Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity.



➤ Sheik Fadhil Suleiman Soraga (middle) was one of the pilgrims.



➤ The pilgrimage path included sites in Wuppertal of current and historical importance.



➤ Meeting in Wuppertal with Mohamed Abodahab (right), chair of the Islam und Frieden in Wuppertal (Islam and Peace in Wuppertal) association.

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