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Recognition of the Baptism and Communion in Growth - Response from a German Free Church Perspective - Bishop em. Rosemarie Wenner, The United Methodist Church

1) Free Churches in Germany – a colorful bouquet and a communion in growth

There are six Free Churches amongst the 17 full members of the Council of Churches in Germany and in addition seven associate members that belong to the category of the Free Churches. The members are Baptists, Mennonites, Methodists, Moravians, Salvation Army and an association of Free Churches in the Pentecostal tradition called: “Mühlheim Association” (Mühlheim is the city where the renewal movement started). The Free Churches are very different in their theology including their ecclesiology and their understanding of the baptism as well as in their history. The Mennonites for example go back to the Anabaptist movement in Reformation era. Others like the Pentecostal churches are quite young; their work in Germany began in the early 20th century. All the Free Churches who belong to the German Council of Churches also belong to the “Association of Protestant Free Churches in Germany”. The Association was founded in 1926 and is today composed of 12 member churches and 3 associate members. The free churches themselves are like a colorful bouquet and the number of those who apply for membership in the German Council of Churches is growing, which is sometimes challenging for the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church. I as a United Methodist am part of one of the founding member churches of the ACK and I am pleased that several other Free Churches are joining the ecumenical movement. There are many other free churches in our country which are not formally connected with the Ecumenical movement - some of them are big independent congregations, some migrant churches. In total those independent free churches may have more members than all the Free Churches in the ACK together.

Although the Free Churches differ in many aspects, they have also a lot in common. Here is a brief summary of the theological foundation as it is expressed on the website of the Association of Protestant Free Churches in Germany¹:

- The one Lord – Jesus Christ is head of the church and of each congregation, he is our redeemer and as the one in whom alone we are saved through faith.
- The one Word – The bible is understood as the Word of God, it is authority and guiding principle in all questions related to doctrine and life.
- The Faith – personally received, confessed and expressed in genuine discipleship (some call it even “holiness”) – discipleship does not only mean personal piety, but also a commitment to serve the world (with an emphasis on religious freedom)
- The Congregation is the Community of Believers. In order to become a member in a Free Church, one has to confess the faith in person. Several free churches only baptize believers;

¹ See: www.vef.de

others (like Methodists) have two membership categories; in order to become a full member, one has to confess the faith in a personal affirmation of the baptism vows.

- The Call to Mission: Free Churches see mission and evangelism as their core calling.
- The hope in Jesus who will come again. The eschatological hope is motivation to do good in the world

In addition to these theological convictions there are several sociological aspects, f.e.:

- A clear separation of Church and State.
- In Europe, the Free Churches are minority churches because of the fact that there were State Churches with certain privileges in all the countries when free churches started.
- For many of us our international relationships are important – f.e. we as United Methodists belong to one Church serving in four continents. Any kind of “coalition” of church and nationality is strange to all of us.

2) Affirmations towards “Community in Growth” and the Recognition of the Baptism

Free Churches are longing for growth in communion – for the sake of mission

Free Churches pray and work for unity. However many Free Churches would not primarily aim for more theological dialogues. They rather have a spiritual approach and understanding: For Free Churches the main calling is to invite people to believe in Christ and to live as a community of disciples of Christ. They are convinced that coming closer to Christ means coming closer to one another. The bible is the source where we learn more about God’s saving action in Christ. “Unity” is seen as gift from God – we are called to discover the gift more and more in order to share our faith “so that the world may believe”. United in Christ – although divided by different theological convictions - we are called to witness Christ in a secularized world.

Free Churches agree that the consensus described in the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification is a core belief that has to lead to consequences in our communal life in the ecumenical movement.

The World Methodist Council was the first entity to sign an agreement in affirmation of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in 2006. Although the other Free Churches and their World Communions did not formally sign such an agreement, they are grateful for the achievement of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. 2002 a Symposium of Roman Catholic and Free Church theologians took place under the theme: “Justification in the Free Churches and Roman Catholic Perspective”². Summarizing the conversations the Roman Catholic theologian Burkhard Neumann said: “We meet one another in the essence of what the Doctrine of Justification is

² All the lectures are published in: Walter Klaiber; Wolfgang Thönissen (Hg.): Rechtfertigung in freikirchlicher und römisch-katholischer Sicht, Bonifatius Verlag Paderborn, Edition Anker Stuttgart, 2003

affirming, namely in the conviction that “that as sinners our new life is solely due to the forgiving and renewing mercy that God imparts as a gift and we receive in faith, and never can merit in any way.”³ Free Churches wish to make this message known. In a declaration of the Association of Protestant Free Churches in Germany in 2017 we expressed our belief as such: “A believer is not saved by his or her own works, but only by God’s grace and justified by faith alone. Christ, the Son of God, is the foundation of our faith. In all of this the Holy Scripture is our guiding principle. In the tradition of the Reformation we are convinced, that the delivering grace filled offer of faith is meant for all. The personal decision to believe changes human beings.”⁴ The consensus marked in JCCJ is shared in the Free Churches. We are committed to proclaim the gospel and we wish to do it with our sisters and brothers in other churches.

There is progress in a uniting understanding of baptism as an initiating process.

Speaking of the Free Churches, only Moravians and Methodists signed the document of the Recognition of the Baptism in Magdeburg in 2007. All the Free Churches however took part in the deliberations that led to the recognition and in the conversations following afterwards how to live with the document. In addition, there are ongoing conversations, f.e. between the Association of Protestant Free Churches and the Evangelical Church in Germany and also with the Roman Catholic Church. Those conversations help to bridge gaps. We learn from one another and we overcome prejudices. Although some continue to ask questions with regard to baptizing children without paying attention to the connection of baptism and personal faith or with regard to “re-baptizing” those who were already baptized as a child, we come closer to one another. This is f.e. marked in a declaration of the Union of Free Churches (Baptist Union) in Germany at the 10th anniversary of the Magdeburg Declaration⁵. In essence the Baptists say that the confession to Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour is sufficient for recognizing one another as Christians and as Christian churches. Nevertheless they say: “The question of the recognition of the baptism as well as the topics eucharist and ministry are important questions in ecumenical conversations. In recent years several theological dialogues helped to gain a better understanding for one another and to build bridges. We wish to continue to clarify questions where we have different insights, yet from our perspective those different insights are not hindering us to live in church fellowship even today.”⁶ Let me briefly describe in substance the achievements in a common understanding: Most of the churches agree that baptism is a process, not just a liturgical act. In addition we all together believe that baptism and faith are like two sides of a coin.

³ See above,. Page 182(Translation R. Wenner) and JDDJ 17

⁴ See: <https://www.vef.de/erklaerungen/reformationsjubilaeum-2017/> (Translation R.Wenner)

⁵ See: https://www.oekumene-ack.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Themen/BEFG_Stellungnahme_Taufanerkennung.pdf

⁶ See above (translation R.Wenner)

Let me share one example. Recently the World Communions of Methodists and Baptists finished a dialogue. In Germany both communions identify themselves as “Free Churches” but they have different theological convictions on Baptism. In the dialogue Methodists and Baptists marked the progress in the ecumenical discussions as such:

“Recent ecumenical dialogues have begun to speak of baptism within a process of initiation or a journey of Christian beginnings in order to recognize the operation of grace prior to the reception of faith. They recognize that in order to recover the full meaning and significance of baptism it is necessary to see baptism as a process and more than a single event. As Baptists and Methodists we both also consider that the process of baptism and Christian initiation involves repentance, faith and conversion/new birth followed by holy living. In our conversations we have found it helpful to understand that the “one baptism” (Eph 4:5) Christians are called to manifest is not merely a single act, but part of an extended process. Such an approach moves beyond comparison of the ways baptism is differently practiced as a single event and moves toward thinking about the varying ways of understanding the whole journey of Christian initiation. Our patterns of initiation differ, and we both believe that our own patterns protect important and precious gospel truths. Yet, in the spirit of receptive ecumenism we also rejoice that we may participate in an exchange of gifts between our churches, recognizing in one another an element of faith and practice which historically we may have lost or rejected , but which would enrich us if reclaimed; and those who have such gifts rejoice to share them. Baptists may receive the Methodist emphasis on preventient grace, whereas Methodists may receive the Baptist emphasis on the drama of Christian conversion.”⁷

Between those who belong to the Association of Protestant Free Churches in Germany our disagreement in the understanding of baptism does not hinder us from recognizing one another as churches and to celebrate Holy Communion together. In an internal document of the Association of Free Churches (Evangelisch sein – Stellungnahme der VEF anhand der Leuenberger Konkordie) we express it as such: “Nevertheless the Free Churches are able to recognize one another as a part of the one Church of Jesus Christ, (see the Constitution of the Association of Protestant Free Churches in Germany), because due to their understanding the church is not primarily community of the baptized, but community of the believers”.

3) Questions

Are there new approaches to express unity – beyond achieving a deeper doctrinal consensus in the understanding of Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry?

One of the Free Churches (Salvation Army) does not even have sacraments. The members of the Salvation Army constantly remind us that progress in a common understanding of Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry does not include them. In addition several of the Free Churches do not feel

⁷ See: http://worldmethodistcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/BWA-WMC_Dialoge_Final_Report_Salisbury_2018.pdf

comfortable with the approaches towards visible unity that many “mainline churches” or “historical churches” prefer: Scholars engage in sophisticated discussions on details searching for a deeper “differentiated consensus” with the aim to sign formal agreements or to create better structures for conciliar work.. Free Churches tend to lean on the “Life and Work” side of the Ecumenical Journey. Acting together is as important as scholarly research. The Salvation Army which I mentioned earlier is a role model in “being church for others”. In addition Free Churches are committed to the spiritual journey in Ecumenism, as it is expressed in the Charta Oecumenica: “The ecumenical movement lives from our hearing God's word and letting the Holy Spirit work in us and through us.”⁸. Are we open to expand our imagination how to grow in community?

Is there awareness for the ecclesiological understanding of many of the Free Churches, which refers mainly to the local congregation as expression of “communio”?

The majority of the Free Churches has a congregational approach: The local congregation is the most important entity in the church, even though in most of them there are regulations on ordination and pastoral services for the whole denomination. Congregationalists are convinced that the local church composed of committed believers, where the gospel is preached and the sacraments (baptism & holy communion) are truly administered, is a full expression of the body of Christ. They also see the need for broader fellowship and communion, but discipleship is to be expressed in a local congregation. The priesthood of all believers is also a strong conviction in the Free Churches. There are only two Free Churches with an Episcopal office of oversight, the Moravian Church (the bishop is seen as the pastor of the pastors) and The United Methodist Church. Methodist bishops belong to order of the presbyters, though, Methodists do not ordain bishops, they consecrate them. The Free Churches see themselves in apostolic succession, because the community of the believers guards and proclaims the apostolic faith. In the Free Churches we believe that anyone has the same “access” to Christ, no matter whether someone is ordained or not, not to speak of any ecclesiastical hierarchy.

How important is “Mission” for the Ecumenical Movement?

As mission minded churches Free Churches focus on the question how to witness Christ in a secularist world – unity in proclamation and service is needed. We would like to see more energy to be put into being church together in service and witness to the world, inspiring one another to lively discipleship, sharing the means of grace together, emphasizing on “Missional Ecumenism” and the “Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace”, including theological reflections on how to witness Christ in the current age.

⁸ See Commitment 5 „Praying together“ in the Charta Oecumenica: <https://www.ceceurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/ChartaOecumenica.pdf>