

**Die Pröpstin
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Es gilt das gesprochene Wort!

**Corona and the new normal
Theologischer Impuls im Rahmen der digitalen Londonkonferenz - The new normal in
society and churches**

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... Spring until autumn 2020 - where we come from and where we stand at the moment

It took a while, some say far too long, to realize: It is not just a flu. No, we obviously have to deal with a bigger kind of danger. For some even a deadly one. The seriousness of the situation has changed within the last months. But now autumn provides us with a new challenge.

Colleagues, brothers and sisters have been discussing a lot what we have learned from the months of the pandemic. We were not prepared for something like this. Some steps had been mistakes. We had the chance to develop a new attitude towards mistakes. We became more accepting with them. Unusual for a church. It was quite often an assessment of the situation to the best of our knowledge in that very moment. And now we realize we can do better, we can trust in the experiences we have already made. The current situation is partly known, partly new.

In Berlin, for instance the number of participants in private celebrations has been reduced. Some institutions in town have been closed again just yesterday. We seem to have started all over again. Traveling is extremely regulated within Germany now. But which travel destinations we can reach is not the most existential question right now.

The issues of daily lives are far more than that. Crucial questions now are: How will we cope with the second possible lockdown? What would it mean for my job, for my family, the older and the younger generation? How do we get through, realizing that now we all personally seem to know more and more people who are infected, are ill, are seriously ill.

Some of the known fears return. In public places you can sort of feel the growing care for each other again. Some might also see it as the typically German inclination to remind each other of rules. People talk to each other more or less friendly, more or less polite, giving hints like: „Your mask is missing.“ Or: „This is not the distance allowed“.

A **minority** of citizens are not willing to be careful any more. It is a minority angry enough to get loud in demonstrations and in social media. It is their right to speak up and a legitimate right in an open democratic society. But the majority is convinced that it is not tolerable and not acceptable that those messages are intentionally mixed with messages of hate, extremism, populism, antisemitism. Some are confused, but my impression is that the majority of people in Germany have a sound understanding of sensible behaviour in a pandemic.

There is also another dimension of Corona. Real stories of love, solidarity, spontaneous help, neighbourhood-schools, hotels being prepared as shelter houses for women, food trucks run by people who normally run hotels and restaurants, garden concerts in the backyards of senior residences. Looking back, I have to say our society was and in many regards still is driven by a growing and wild individualism as much as an ongoing liberalisation in all terms. Corona was and is an interruption in many regards.

We experienced how the common sense for community and solidarity grew in greater neighbourhoods as much as in the smallest villages. A shine of light, the best in us above all the worries. Not just a digitalization push but a push of solidarity.

If you had the task to put into a picture what this time is all about, what would you choose? I have found my thoughts mirrored in a painting by Caspar David Friedrich.

It is a piece of art more than 200 years old. Probably this is known to most of you. You recognize the typical romantic style of Caspar David Friedrich. It was shockingly avantgarde in its time, projecting inner landscapes into pictures of seemingly realistic landscapes of the world around him. It was an expression of the search for emotionally true answers in a world that seemed to freeze more and more under the impacts of rationality and dogmatics of all kinds.

Let me explain, why I chose the painting *Abbey in the Oak Forrest*, the *Abtei im Eichwald*. C.D. Friedrich was not much of a church goer, but he was a serious protestant Christian. Questions of life and death, of belief and hope were central issues for him. Some call his work religious. In any case his work is well known as a work of romanticism filled with allegories and symbols of the Christian heritage. In this painting of a winter landscape at dawn, a Gothic ruin, a kind of church fragment stands right in the centre – a link between the bright sky and the dark earth. In the lower part a funeral procession of monks is carrying a coffin into the ruin, an open grave in the snow is barely visible in the foreground between the crosses and stones of a cemetery. It seems to be a very dark picture.

In these days, our first impression of the things happening around us may seem discouraging, frightening and dark. In Germany, almost 10.000 people have died from or with Corona this year.

In the painting, we are also able to see a line above which there is a mysterious brightness and otherness, taking up two thirds of the picture, a ratio implying that there is something stronger than the rituals of dealing with death below. I would like to speak about this light shining in the upper part of this picture. About the light shining above all the scary impressions of the changed daily life around us.

What was C.D. Friedrich's intention while he created *Abbey in the Oak Forrest*? In a letter to a friend, he wrote that while working on it he was in a process of meditation concerning the future of religion. He was not a theologian and not a man of the church, but a man of strong faith, and I can only speculate what the results of his meditations mean when I see them in this painting: We are enlightened, we are experiencing the freedom of expressing our individual search for the transcendental, and we have to find an answer to the questions of life and death in the cold of modern society. We have left behind the age of religion in its institutional shape, in the way we used to know it in the old church. Now we enter into a time of something new. We turn towards times when institutionalized religions are vanishing. A new spirituality is making its way among us.

I personally assume that the age of religion in an institutionalized shape is vanishing. I also assume that we are entering the age of a new kind of spirituality. The pandemic has opened eyes and mind for this. I assume that there are strong powers fighting back against this process, pulling back into the old normality. They are becoming stronger the more we get used to Corona.

If we should grasp the situation today in a sort of avantgarde-painting what would it be? Would we see a link between the realm of death and the realm of heaven? A link looking somehow like a church fragment? What is seen at first sight and what is the meaning under the surface? Friedrich taught us to differentiate. Also in our time.

What is the new normal within and after the pandemic?

The title “new normal” suggests that we are in a process of transition from something old to something new. It also suggests that we are inclined to soften the impression of newness by assuming that what is new has already become a normality or at least something pretty much similar to the old. This assumption may be rash. It could very well be that this transition is actually a rupture, rather revolutionary than evolutionary in nature. Whatever its nature may be, its cause is a pandemic, a natural disaster, developing in slow motion and hitting societies already destabilized by a deteriorating trust in fellow citizens, in their institutions and shared values, especially transcendental ones. In my view, the pandemic has only accelerated a process of social transition that forces us to focus and concentrate on long necessary changes, also in our churches.

We need to step back for a moment and reflect, and I would like to do so using an instrument developed by a German sociologist and self-proclaimed futurologist named Matthias Horx. He published an article this spring that soon went viral, in which he observed that the pandemic blocked people’s minds with anxiety, self-doubt and distrust. To regain our capability to imagine the future with all its possibilities, to retain our “future minds”, as he called it, we needed not a prognosis but a regnosis. By this he meant performing a mental exercise in which we imagine some point in the future, an imaginable situation of ourselves in this future and us looking back at today. We then ask ourselves: How did we get here? How did we manage the difficulties? What was important to get us here? With the help of this exercise, we bypass the fears and doubts dominating our present situation and open our minds to the multitude of options the future always presents us with, but which we sometimes cannot see. It is like the upper part of Friedrichs painting. The bright part. Caspar David Friedrich probably meant this brightness in metaphysical terms. Matthias Horx fills the brighter part of the whole picture with a sort of mental method. The intentions are not the same but I would say they are not too far away from each other.

So I invite you all to imagine us sitting here together in a zoom conference in October 2021. You will be asking me, why it will be a zoom conference again in 2021, now that a vaccine has been developed and distributed in every country except North Korea and almost everyone except for the most stubborn vaccination refusers has been vaccinated; and I will answer that it is a precautionary measure but also supported by the churches in view of their desperately decreasing budgets. Travelling to conferences will be possible again, but morally and financially in need of much more justification than before the pandemic. Justifying things morally and financially will have become a big trend now that Joe Biden is running and reuniting the United States of America and Germany has a new and very conservative chancellor, a man named Markus Söder who gained much of his popularity when he implemented the strictest regulations to contain the spreading of the virus in the state of Bavaria in 2020.

On a more serious note: What are the questions that my church will be asking itself, that our churches will be asking themselves in October 2021 when they look back at the times of the pandemic? I think three questions should be preeminent.

Has the church, have its representatives treated the sick and the dying the way Jesus would have treated the sick and the dying?

Has the church, have its representatives conveyed the message that there is a meaning to life and a meaning to death to those who hungered for it in the times of the pandemic?

And has the church adapted the ways it conveys and spreads its message to a society in which people increasingly doubt in institutions and traditional ways of constituting a community, even more: a communion?

I will try to answer these questions with as much honesty and as much hope as I can muster, looking back at the Evangelical Church of Berlin-Brandenburg-Silesian Upper Lusatia in the twelve months before October 2021.

Fist question. My answer: No and Yes.

First of all there was an excessive demand for and a great lack of protective systems, not to speak of protective clothing. That's why houses and hospitals closed and – also the church – discouraged the people who actually were trained and ready to help, to listen, to comfort. But in a second phase, yes, more and more we followed the call, regained our voice of hope and faith, did not remain silent when society started to talk about death, fear of death, the fragility and the limits of life. Did not remain silent when asked what is the higher value – to be safe and isolated or to be in danger but being accompanied. Did not remain silent when asked whether there is a way of getting help when life is not bearable anymore. Did not remain silent when we were asked how God foresees and cares in the days of death and sickness. And filled with life insights like Tom Wright phrased them (quote):

„We are simply to know that when we are caught up in awful circumstances, apparent gross injustices, terrible plagues – or when we are accused of wicked things of which we are innocent, suffering strange sicknesses with no apparent reason, let alone cure – at those points we are to lament, we are to complain, we are to state the case, and leave it with God. God himself declares at the end that Job has told the truth (42.8). He has clung on to the fact that God is just, even though his own misery seems to deny it. Jesus not only drew on that story. He lived it. He died under it“.¹

We also learned that there are times, when we go with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's insight: I believe, that God meets us not only as a „you“ and „me“ but I encounter also an „it“ hooded in the „you“. It is necessary to find the „you“ in the „it“. („Ich glaube, Gott begegnet uns nicht nur als ein Du, sondern auch verumummt im Es und es geht im Grunde darum, wie wir in diesem Es das Du finden.“)²

Meeting clinic chaplains this summer I listened to their experiences. Some of them went through the infection. Some were overwhelmed by the work they had to go through, some resumed: As Christians we need a kind of *professional carefreeness* regarding ourselves. It is not recklessness or foolishness. It is an attitude which has dealt with the risk and knows what it means to be called to the people in danger.

Second question. My answer: No and yes.

In the beginning we were caught by fears and sometimes even at some point by institutional selfishness. Since March 2020 I see more clearly that my church was stuck in a kind of Babylonian captivity before and it is still in the battle of getting out of this captivity³. Maybe it is not like 1520 when Martin Luther wrote about the Babylonian captivity of his church. But there is at least one link: there is a crisis of leadership and a crisis of faith. This is no time for an evolutionary process, that was Luther's position. It is time for a systemic turn, a disruptive moment grounded in the faith of freedom of the people seeing and perceiving themselves as justified. 2020 had the potential to reveal our captivity in prosperity and sham security, in traditions which do not breathe anymore and therefore do not serve the believers anymore. So yes, we will have had this exodus out of the captivity into a fluid, spiritual movement. And we do not pretend to know all answers and to be morally at the right side. But we will learn in listening and praying what is needed for the moment to become a church helping in all issues of life. Our first service is to share hope and faith and confidence.

¹ WRIGHT, TOM. God and the Pandemic (S.14). SPCK. Kindle-Version.

² DBW 8, 333.

³ How to transform structures that don't serve us anymore. How to reform our church and how to face the demographic and the financial challenges as much as the secularization in our region. How to concentrate our work and how to focus on the people who leave church in their early 20ties and thirties. Not everywhere discussed, not for everyone of course crucial, but to a certain degree a main issue... This process of transformation did not stop in March. It changed. The energy behind and the motivations changed. Caused by what was also called a crisis. A situation when it's urgent time to get into decisionmaking.

Especially in times of uncertainty; this remains our first and supreme call. „It means that, when the world is going through great convulsions, the followers of Jesus are called to be people of prayer at the place where the world is in pain.”⁴ We do this in our caring for soul and body, in words and deeds. Some thousands of the 8000 employees and more than three times more of them volunteering in our church took this as their chance – to develop new ways of caring and communicating the gospel by new media and on digital ways. New concepts of a visiting church, a church outside, the church building, looking after each other, new shapes of digital services, new kinds of telephone-services, of podcasts, video material, letters and give-aways put in front of church buildings made an explosion of creativity, warmth, friendliness and curiosity for new ways finding each other. New ways even were discovered of doing less administrative work, less meetings just for administration. And most of the people do not want to return to the former patterns of work and parish life. Nourishing a – mixed – community as a fluid movement more than a stable parish, following the deep gospel wisdom that the small will be the great, the weak the strong and the last the first ones.

Third questions. My answer no and yes.

In the beginning we were proud of being an institution as a relevant partner in civil society and politics, partner in the systems of support and caring for people. We are strong enough to stand at the side of people in special and desperate need, since we have built networks of support, encouragement and help. We are here to help. In the beginning we have been proud also to be the voice heard in the discourses regarding social justice and questions of ethics particularly. Still are. Being part of the nationwide committee of ethics, being part of the discussion about „triage“ and the current demands towards our health service system, proud of that kind of relevance of the church. But what about the awareness regarding the vanishing trust in our institution?

We have learned to take the path to a humble church, truly humble, and learned to get out of the crosshairs of public criticism as much as possible.⁵ Being seriously open and clear about our crisis of church services. Caused by the pandemic we are in a high speed transition from traditional institutionalized shapes of church service towards new and renewing kinds of spirituality. Of course for many people this high speed transition feels like a loss and is being mourned over. All we can do is to accompany people during grief work on the one hand and take the chance to welcome this new way of getting into a talk with God on the other hand. It needs quite a lot of encouragement to let the forms of church service go when they are not filled with meaning, inner joy and life anymore. But I am serious here, I am not light-hearted or easygoing. I am serious about the obligation *to let go*. Some speak of „palliative ecclesiology“.

And this has to do with a lot of respect and praise for what has been and a lot of respect towards the attitude of letting go. It is the only way we can obtain open space for renewal. If we do not allow ourselves to let go we are not open for the new. There is no simple addition.

And after that? How do we welcome the new ... (and when will it be) normal?

⁴ WRIGHT, TOM. God and the Pandemic (S.43). SPCK. Kindle-Version.

⁵ As church we have been criticized for not being there when people were dying in the hospitals, when people were desperately waiting for visitors in the senior residences. We have been criticized for not being clear and loud enough in offering an interpretation of what was happening around us. We were criticized for not being clear enough about what this all meant for the younger generations, our children. Finally we were strongly criticized for pausing the services in the church buildings, even for pausing with singing. And we had to ask ourselves: Had we been too fearful and too obedient to the state's rules? My balance sheet so far: It is a narrative (criticism) proven unsubstantial. From today's knowledge I maintain, we have been right to be there individually for whoever was in need. We have been right not to take the risk of allowing a church service to become a hotspot or a spreading event. It is not because we care too much about personal health and too little about God's call. To be prudent, as Paul says, demands no religious cockiness (Übermut/ vgl. P. Stoellger).

Let us return from the prognosis to the diagnosis of our church situation today. After longtime church-debates on reform projects and the discussion of how to get through the transformation process during the last years, we have reached a new level in 2020. It is now an urgent moment of getting into decisions. Yet, the mission of a (our?) church as the one, universal and holy one *has not changed*. The mission to go to all people and to find ways of communicating the gospel by word, and by sacrament, remains the same. New insights evolve regarding communication and growing communion, holy communion. One example: the eucharist. Finally.

In the last two years it was our challenge to discuss as intensively as possible the following question: who invites the sinners to the altar offering bread and wine, and who is allowed to follow this life-changing invitation? So we had discussed some really crucial points of one of our two sacraments. Following the theological agreement of Leuenberg (1973) we underlined the common ground that Jesus is the one who invites, is present and at the same time offers himself at the altar of the sacrament. We are there to serve, to administer this invitation by Jesus. This has an impact on the questions of how to welcome people. Not to speak of the conclusion that nobody can be excluded from the Lord's invitation. So *whom* do we welcome in the name of Jesus and *how* do we do this? In this group, I do not have to elaborate on what we see, celebrate, receive and remember with the eucharist. It is the most precious invitation for a Christian in life, opening up the horizon for new life, free and contained in God's love forever. The conclusion out of this is to take away obstacles on the way to the altar, to reduce the obstacles in order to turn this meal of love into a feast for everybody who realizes they are called by Jesus. I find this to be one of the challenging questions in the ecumenical world and within the protestant churches. Yes, there are other questions within the ecumenical family which ask for discussions, for instance the question of an eucharist at the screen, in digital terms. I allow myself to maintain: I do not want to deny that there may be a new normal in digital eucharist one day very soon. There will be virtual realities, virtual landscapes and even virtual parishes, I assume. People will search for the link, for connection, contact and for the opportunity to take part at the table with Jesus, the risen Lord who lived his dedication. I understand the longing of people at this point. And nobody will judge that God finds ways in Jesus to encounter people even in new digital ways. But all in all, I allow myself to judge that is a subordinate question.

In the beginning and on the ground of it all is one belief, as there is one baptism and one Lord: Jesus Christ invites into his presence, healing, forgiving, promising. Held in a mystery of infinite love. I do not know of any friend who would issue such an important invitation, a life-altering invitation for me - and I would take part via zoom. To be clear: Jesus will find the path into the lives and hearts of God's children. Wherever and whenever. But my longing is like the longing of Zacchaeus, not to keep distance but to open the house and the heart and to share what I have at one table together. It will provide me and my sisters and brothers with the spirit and hope we live from throughout all experiences of covid19 and other crises still to come. This is how we could welcome the Lord of our lives, realizing that he already has welcomed us and gives us space to welcome the new... normal.

Thank you so much for your patient listening.