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Temasektion

“Deafening silence of theologians” vs. creative local parishes during the Corona pandemic?

A case study of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD)¹

Keywords

Covid-19, Evangelical Church in Germany, EKD, secularisation, Protestant theology, German media

Abstract 21 million Germans belong to the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD). This report will highlight initial official theological reactions of the EKD to the Corona pandemic. The Protestant Church faced widespread criticism from prominent figures for its handling of the pandemic. This paper gives an overview of the major objections and it looks at how the EKD and its representatives reacted to it. Yet this report also looks at the numerous resourceful initiatives of churches to react in creative formats to social distancing measures issued by the German Länder and/or the federal government. In sum, Covid-19 has had a huge impact on each congregation – as a community and for individual believers but also on the self-perception of the Protestant Church and its social relevance in an increasingly secularised society.

“Theologians are keeping a deafening silence” – this quote by the Jewish historian Michael Wolffsohn (2020) was taken up by the Protestant pastor Alexander Brodt-Zabka (2020) who added his personal opinion that this “deafening silence” by theologians “hurts”. The image this conjures up is distorting and disturbing. In fact, this accusation upset many people working in

¹ Please note: Although this might be confusing to readers from an Anglo-American context, the author will use the term evangelical as is standard usage in Germany and how the Evangelical Church of Germany is describing herself on the church body's English website. In Germany “evangelisch” refers to mainline Protestantism, i.e. mainline Lutheran, Reformed or Union Protestants in opposition to “evangelikal”, which in the German context is often translated as Free Evangelical churches and in English would be considered evangelical Protestants.

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and for the Protestant Church², either as ministers or in the wide area of Diakonie (social-welfare) who have actively sought to find ways to continue religious life and service for their parishes in the face of lockdown measures imposed by the federal government and the *Länder* (federal states). These people feel that they have not been silent at all, but busy, active and innovative – showing everyone that “the church”³ is not just for a few old ladies who regularly attend Sunday church services, but that it is still relevant, trying to use new media and new approaches to listen to people’s daily concerns in times of crisis and social lockdown. In fact, the Corona pandemic has highlighted the different expectations “the church” has to manage – with her message(s) and also in her public presentation. Some authors expected clergy, especially bishops, to produce immediate and clear theological answers in response to the global pandemic; some seemed to hope that “the church” would actively resist Corona restrictions laid down by the state; others saw an obligation for “the church” to stand with the weak and the dying; and several people wished for a more forceful and more visible role of “the church” in public discussions.

This report looks at the different positions and reactions taken within the Evangelical Church of Germany (EKD) mainly during the first six months of the Corona pandemic in 2020. Social, or rather physical, distancing rules and all regulations defining the lockdown measures taken by the German government and/or *Länder* have had a huge impact on organised religion. Worship services no longer took place in churches but were streamed online. Pastoral care had to find new ways in time of crisis. Life rituals, which are major events in people’s lives, and which are expressions of organised Christianity, such as baptisms, weddings, confirmations and even funerals had to be cancelled or at least delayed. So how did the EKD as the umbrella organisation of 14,412 parishes or congregational communities react to Covid 19 in the first half of 2020?

2 Protestant Church, which in German is “Evangelische Kirche”, and which is the short version of all regional member churches of different traditions under the organisational roof of EKD. Moreover, the author uses throughout the text the term Protestant interchangeably for the German “evangelisch” – terminological differences to the

Anglo-American context have been explained in footnote 1.

3 The author purposefully uses the generic term “the church” throughout the article and in this sense can be used interchangeably for the two big church organisations (EKD & Roman Catholic Church) in Germany. It is meant as a reflection of everyday speech by people who

have clear expectations of what “the church” should stand for, but vague ideas and knowledge of the actual functioning of either the EKD churches or the Roman Catholic Church. Perhaps “the church” terminology could be best compared to the equally generically used term “elites”.

The Evangelical Church of Germany (EKD) – One Body with Different Members

Although Germany is considered the Land of the Reformation which took place over 500 years ago when Martin Luther demanded reform of the existing (Roman Catholic) church, there exist two major Christian denominations in Germany: Protestants with around 21 million faithful and Roman Catholics with around 22 million believers (Statistisches Bundesamt 2020). There are also around 2 million other Christians – such as Orthodox Christians, members of Free Evangelical Churches and other Christian communities (EKD 2016, 6). In contrast to Scandinavian countries where the Lutheran church used to be or still is the state church, churches in Germany, Protestant ones in particular, have had a different history with many regional variations. The EKD can even refer to the Bible to reflect these differences. “Indeed, the body does not consist of one member, but of many.” (1 Corinthians 12:14, NRSV). “The Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) is a union or an umbrella organisation of the Lutheran, Reformed and United regional churches within the Federal Republic of Germany.” (EKD 2016, 6). The federalism of Germany is also mirrored in the structures of regional churches, with each of the member churches having “a distinctive character shaped by its respective confessional tradition [e.g. Lutheran, Reformed or United] and is constrained to a particular region.” (EKD 2016, 6). The Protestant Church is overseen by elected representative bodies. In the congregations, elected volunteers work together on an equal footing with clergy within the Parochial Church Council. This principle of shared leadership responsibility is also applied in the synods, church districts, member churches and throughout the whole structure, including the bodies of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD 2016, 9). The synods (church parliaments) in regional churches and at EKD level are made up of clergy and non-theologians. All churches of the EKD are thus jointly governed by lay people and clergy, which may be difficult to understand for those unfamiliar with the structure of the Evangelical Church and accustomed to a more hierarchical organisation such as the Roman Catholic Church. “In the public sphere, the Chairperson of the EKD acts as its legal representative and official speaker. The Council issues public statements on matters relating to life in church and society through memoranda, studies and other publications.” (EKD 2016, 10). Consequently and increasingly, German mainstream media mainly cover quotes of the chairperson of the EKD or some of the more prominent and

media-savvy bishops of the regional churches as they are usually seen as the most authoritative voices for public statements. This fact is also reflected in the quotes used in this paper.

Methodology

This report is an overview of official statements and discussions that took place mainly between March 2020 and August 2020. Discussions on ethics, the role of the churches and religion in contemporary secular German society during the Corona pandemic were to be found in daily newspapers with a nationwide appeal such as *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)*, *Die Welt*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Tagesspiegel*, or in weeklies such as *Die Zeit*.

Official websites, *EKD.de* and *evangelisch.de*, and those of regional churches were analysed for Corona-related content, as were religious programmes of German public radio and television. Protestant publications such as the monthly *chrismon plus* and regional Protestant weeklies including *Die Kirche*, *Der Sonntag*, *Sonntagsblatt*, *Unsere Kirche* and others belonging to the regional churches were also consulted as they are read by Protestants in their particular regions. To better gauge the ongoing theological discussions, the theological monthly magazine *Zeitzeichen* was also included in this report. Although the author is not a theologian, some theological discussions will be interspersed to better understand the theological struggle inside the EKD to come to terms with the Corona pandemic. Interviews with and personal accounts by parish pastors add some subjective authenticity. This study does not aim nor does it claim to be an academic paper drawing on theories of religion and society. Instead, it is a snapshot of ongoing discussions among Protestants belonging to the EKD, the second-largest organised religious group in the country, and to which the author belongs. Despite closeness to the subject, the author has tried to describe the situation as objectively as possible.

The EKD – Evangelical Church in Germany – No longer system-relevant?

Most Germans realised that the Corona pandemic was having serious effects on their everyday lives when schools, universities, nurseries and most of public life went into lockdown in

mid-March 2020. It was in these weeks before Easter that churches were also affected by the lockdown measures. From 16 March, 2020, all social gatherings, including public worship services, could no longer take place. Loved ones could not be visited in care homes by their families, as they were under complete lockdown for fear of infecting care home residents.

The gravity of the situation was underlined by Chancellor Angela Merkel addressing the German public in a televised speech on 18 March, 2020. Apart from her annual televised New Year’s message, this was the first time in Merkel’s 15-year reign as Germany’s chancellor that she directly addressed the German public. She appealed to the public for solidarity in tackling the pandemic together, to stick to the rules that were based on the advice of virologists and epidemiologists. She thanked several professional groups, such as people working in the medical sector but also those working tirelessly on the supermarket tills. She also pointed out that “[w]e want to be close to each other, especially in times of need. We know affection as physical closeness or touch. But right now, unfortunately, the opposite is true. And that’s what we all need to understand: Right now, distance is the only way to express caring” (General-Anzeiger 2020).

It was during these initial weeks that everyone, including church staff, had to adapt to the new circumstances. Some seemed to enjoy the new experience of a slower pace of life, whereas others were under extreme emotional stress: many had to entertain and home-school children while also managing their workload, often under adverse working conditions. Some worried about loved ones in care homes, who they could no longer visit; many worried about losing their jobs and, for some, the thought of death and their own mortality entered their lives for the first time. In such a time of crisis, when old certainties no longer appear so strong, expectations usually arise that religion and philosophy will provide answers to important life questions.

4 There will be no further reference to the Orthodox Church in Germany throughout the paper as membership is low in comparison to EKD and the Roman Catholic Church. In Germany, journalists often speak of “the two big churches”, they then refer to the Protestant EKD and the Roman Catholic Church.

5 Assistance, Comfort and Hope

The Churches’ Joint Statement that no one seemed to notice

As early as 20 March 2020, the Evangelical, Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches⁴ in Germany released a joint statement “Beistand, Trost und Hoffnung”⁵. In it, the bishops tried to give clear guidelines on the necessity of abstaining, for a limited pe-

riod, from holding worship services with congregations, despite the inherent need for physically meeting together for worship. They appealed to the faithful for their solidarity and sense of Christian charity. Moreover, they also gave theological explanations that the current pandemic was not God’s punishment and they quoted from the Bible to underline that Christians, when they prepare for Easter during Lent, should trust in God and look to the future in hope (EKD et al. 2020). Yet despite this early statement touching both theological and practical questions of the pandemic, both the EKD and the Roman Catholic Church in Germany faced heavy criticism for being too silent, or for no longer being relevant in contemporary German society for adequate answers to questions of life and death. Confronted with the accusation that bishops and the churches had been silent, the EKD chairperson, Bishop Bedford-Strohm, voiced his surprise that almost no newspaper had taken notice, either in March or later, of this joint statement. When it was suggested that newsrooms would have noticed if the churches had set out clear demands, Bedford-Strohm replied that “we have worked together on a common solution, often behind the scenes, and in this way, we have helped more people than by attacking policies or politicians (...) Should I really stand up in public and publicly accuse [the authorities, K.N.]? This would have certainly ensured my presence in newspapers but what kind of service would I have offered to anyone?” (Kosch & Mawick 2020)

There appears to be a mismatch between what the big churches actually do and say, whether or not this reaches the public and, in turn, how it is then perceived. In researching this paper, the author found much criticism of the EKD’s handling of the Corona pandemic. This paper will outline the main points of criticism in the following subchapters. However, there is also a different, more enthusiastic view about the creative energy set free in the churches during the pandemic. Consequently, the paper also highlights some of these examples.

Spirituality and pastoral care not deemed relevant and churches are standing by

It was critically remarked that in her speech to the German public, Angela Merkel did not mention the need for pastoral care nor the need for spiritual guidance and finding answers to ethical

questions in times of crisis: for example, when hospital doctors may have to resort to triaging patients in case of limited hospital capacity. Some theologians interpreted Merkel’s silence such that she considered churches or organised religion in general as insignificant. Others commented that it was not for Merkel to point out the churches’ importance but for the churches themselves to prove their relevance in times of crisis (Finger 2020).

Ulrich Körtner, professor of theology at the University of Vienna, claims that Corona has illustrated the declining significance of both churches in everyday life, “there were no exemptions for churches and other religious communities during the shutdown.” (Körtner 2020). Deckers calls it the “religiously pain-free society” (Deckers 2020), where leaders of organised religion have accepted painlessly the interference of the state in their basic rights of religious freedoms. Further, large parts of society do not seem to miss religion and religious life in their everyday lives (Ibid.) During this crisis, politicians have been advised by virologists and epidemiologists, who have a dominant presence in the news media, on talk shows or with their own podcasts. When people have looked to the future, they referred to forecasts by economists or scientists in their “role as secular prophets” (Körtner 2020). Only later on was there room for (child) psychologists and sociologists who spoke of the negative impacts of a continued lockdown. The list of essential key workers included those employed in journalism and banking, but it excluded pastors/priests who are essential in pastoral care. This was taken as proof of the increasing secularisation of society, in which churches are no longer considered relevant for a functioning social system (in German *systemrelevant*) (Körtner 2020). It did not make a difference that the managing director of the German Association of Towns and Municipalities (*Deutscher Städte- und Gemeindebund*), Gerd Landsberg, voiced his surprise and anger that pastors were not included in the long list of key workers issued by the *Länder* and who asked for this to be rectified (chrismon 2020). The editorialist, Matthias Morgenroth, complained that everything spiritual had been declared as dispensable (Morgenroth 2020), even though many people felt lost for answers during lockdown.

Corona as punishment of God?

Several theological, philosophical and ethical discussions took place in the pages of the respected conservative daily, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)*, which later found entry in theological periodicals such as *chrismon plus* and *Zeitzeichen*. They provided space for theologians to discuss the idea of theodicy and whether Corona could be considered as God’s punishment of humankind. Most theologians who belong to the mainstream Protestant spectrum rejected such an idea. In a sermon-like commentary published in *chrismon plus*, its publisher and chairperson of the EKD, Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, wrote about quite often hearing questions such as “Where is God during the Corona crisis?” or “Why does God let it happen that the Corona virus can bring so much suffering?” from people who do not consider themselves overly religious (Bedford-Strohm 2020, 10). He countered this by quoting the Prophet Jeremiah 29:11 “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” (New International Version). This image of a punishing God is not compatible with the one described by Jeremiah (Bedford-Strohm 2020, 10). For him, it was unimaginable to see God as the perpetrator of numerous deaths, when Jesus who Christians perceive as God’s essence in human form did not kill but rather healed, raised and comforted people. He pointed to the fact that our destructive behaviour towards our environment may play a big part in the creation of new deadly viruses and therefore we should not blame God for them. Moreover, he adds that we should generally say goodbye to the image of a punishing God who sits somewhere in heaven and who, according to his whims, decides to push a Tsunami button or to create a new virus which he then catapults to earth (Ibid.) Instead, Bedford-Strohm outlines his belief that God has not yet finished his creation and that it is an evolving process. Thus, he says that we can trust that God will provide us with strength to grow even from difficult experiences (Bedford-Strohm 2020).

Jörg Herrmann, managing director of Evangelische Akademie Hamburg, wrote the guest commentary “Corona and the Church – A Struggle at God’s Side” in *FAZ*. It is a very theological piece about why the Corona pandemic is not God’s punishment. He refers to several Christian and Jewish theologians who all struggled with the question of why God accepted human suffering, for example in Auschwitz or in Rwanda. After these

events, many believers felt a sense of a powerless or even an impotent God. But Herrmann goes on to describe several attempts by theologians and philosophers of religion to understand the concept of God after Auschwitz. They no longer adhere to the image of an omnipotent God who stands – Zeus-like – on the turntables of world history punishing people. Instead, the evangelical theologian, Dorothee Sölle, talks about “the compassionate God” who suffers with us.

Even if most mainstream Protestant theologians did not perceive Corona as God’s punishment, there were some voices, such as the former military bishop of the EKD Hartmut Löwe, who, although he did not see the pandemic as a punishment, interpreted it at least as an affliction from God. His opinion piece, published in *FAZ*, received much attention within the church when he wrote that he missed a wide-ranging theological interpretation of the current Corona pandemic from leading theologians, especially bishops who, according to Löwe, “usually outbid each other by making statements on anything and everything but now don’t seem to find any spiritual words” (Löwe 2020). In his opinion, this would also have to include the question on whether or not the pandemic is God’s punishment. He referred to Martin Luther who quite naturally viewed the plague as God’s punishment. Löwe rejects the image of God as a revenge-seeking autocrat; instead he uses the word *Heimsuchung*, which can mean visitation or affliction. According to Löwe, “God wants to be found in and amongst everything that is happening, even if we have difficulty in understanding his actions or if we cannot understand it at all. But whoever cannot speak of God’s wrath will spoil the talk of God’s love. Then this becomes diffuse emotional drudgery, an unstable commonplace wisdom without any concrete basis in life experience.” He continues that “in the cross of Jesus Christ, the foundation of Christianity, the love and wrath of God are shown as two sides of one action. You can’t have one without the other.” He asks, “What can Christian faith do to help weather the current crisis? What does faith tell us beyond scientific, economic and social statements? (...) Cultural Protestant trivialities fail to give answers in a crisis that has come upon us. Here we have to dig much deeper theologically and spiritually. Are our current church leaders able to do it in their busyness? So far we have heard nothing of it.” (Löwe 2020).

One of the scolded church leaders, namely EKD chairper-

son Bishop Bedford-Strohm, strongly replied in several media that church leaders had sought theological answers in the joint statement issued on 20th March, as well as in many more public statements, interviews and in sermons. In an interview, he pointed out that he has a very different view from Löwe in that “we experience God in Jesus Christ. And Jesus Christ has healed, not killed. (...) We have to say goodbye to an image of God as someone who is in charge and control of everything. Dietrich Bonhoeffer has described it with challenging words, ‘Only the suffering God is able to help.’ This is an awesome statement. We have to overcome the image of God holding us like marionette puppets on strings or as a *deus ex machina* who chimes in by force.” (Kosch & Mawick 2020). He goes on in a lengthy, yet very interesting, theological discourse about his personal image of God expressed mainly in the life of Jesus Christ who expressed radical love, who wanted to end suffering and who has healed people. When the interviewers also refer to Jesus’ anger and wrath in reference to the “wrath of God”, which was also used by Löwe, Bedford-Strohm does not accept it. Instead he differentiates between Jesus’ holy rage versus a rage often interpreted as God’s wrath. He views Jesus’ sacred rage directed “against people who sabotaged the reign of God” and, according to Bedford-Strohm, this “holy rage descends from radical love. It is a completely different form of rage interpreted as God’s wrath, who sees his authority undermined and who would reprimand humans for it. This is not God who comes towards me in Jesus Christ. The latter is a loving, a suffering and even a powerless God who has touched billions of people through his power which was extracted through his suffering on the cross. These people [touched by the loving God; K.N.] change the world. This is a power which has risen from powerlessness and not from the strength of military legions.” (Kosch & Mawick 2020).

Church not announcing their core messages better

Several theologians have complained about the churches’ disregard towards talking more about hope, which should be the core message of Christianity. The theologian Ulrich Körtner described the situation when, at a talk show, the writer Thea Dorn, who describes herself as an atheist, spoke about the day she walked past a church in Hamburg on her way to the TV studio and saw a big banner quoting 2 Timothy 1:7. She said, “I didn’t think I would sit

in a television studio and would say: The best sentence that I saw today was a quote from the Bible. And it said on it: ‘For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.’ This sentence really blew me away because my impression is that currently we are massively led by a spirit of fear and not by the spirit of power, love and a sound mind. And I don’t think that it is good that our society is more and more defined by a spirit of fear.” (Körtner 2020). He continued that Dorn had hit the nail on the head of a core theological message better than many theologians in the past months (Körtner 2020).

Overall, it became clear in several proclamations by theologians that they were missing the willingness of the church to “use the pandemic as an occasion to think anew and intensively about the spiritual meaning and the depth of our Christian faith.” (Brodt-Zabka 2020). For him, it is worth reflecting thoroughly on, for example, the central biblical sentence from Psalm 90:12 “So teach us to consider our mortality, so that we might live wisely.” (New English Translation). The *memento mori* (the reminder of one’s own mortality) has been an essential part of the church’s message since its inception. It leaves Becker (2020) puzzled that the churches were so quiet about it these days. As the former EKD chairperson, Margot Käßmann, pointed out, a lot of people were confronted for the first time with thoughts about their own death, something they have avoided before. “I have seen it as a parish priest. People are no longer familiar with rituals at the cemetery. There is a huge feeling of awkwardness. There is a growing number of anonymous burials. People no longer put death notices in newspapers so that others would have a chance to participate in the funerals. We have pushed away all questions surrounding death, to care homes, far away, also to hospitals. We don’t let people die at home. (...) so this phantasy arises that dying will not affect me and therefore it is like a blow of the hammer that there is a virus which could affect me and then all of a sudden it gets very personal.” (Käßmann 2020b) Becker quotes from a survey conducted in November 2019 that 74% of people asked were afraid of dying alone with no one caring for them in their final hours in care homes or hospitals. Becker muses that the majority of Germans are no longer aware that pastors can accompany them in their last hours, something that went without saying in the past (Becker 2020). She and others complain about the churches’ inability to convey the core message that their staff, pastors, deacons and

social workers have the ability, competency and willingness to be with people at the end of life and to comfort the bereaved in times of crisis (Becker 2020). This focus on people in crisis would have been an opportunity to recall the social and caring role of “the church” in German society; instead, critics chided both churches for not being more visibly present at deathbeds in care homes and hospitals during the pandemic.

Neglecting Pastoral Care for the Dying?

Christine Lieberknecht, former Prime Minister of Thuringia and until 1990 a Lutheran parish pastor, heavily criticised the churches for “having neglected more than hundreds of thousands of people”, “the sick, lonely, old and dying” in an interview with *Die WELT* newspaper (Malzahn 2020). She was particularly critical that the dying had been left alone in care homes without any pastoral care, “There was no prayer of a last psalm, no consolation was given and no final blessing happened on deathbeds.” (Malzahn 2020). This criticism was firmly rejected by the EKD chairperson (dpa 2020) as inappropriate and unjustified. The Speaker of the Catholic German Bishops, Matthias Kopp, proclaimed that the exact opposite had in fact been true (dpa 2020). According to him, “pastoral care workers in hospitals have done an unbelievably hard job” under these conditions. Bishop Bedford-Strohm referred to the many pastors who had taken personal risks and worked themselves into the ground to be there for all those in need (dpa 2020). Peter Dabrock, the previous chair of the German Ethics Council, and himself a Protestant theologian, heavily criticised Lieberknecht for accusing churches this way, without having proof for her exaggerated numbers. Moreover, he considered it very “unfair to accuse pastors in such a generalised attack” as many of them “have gone to great lengths to reach people in need via phone, letters or various means of communication.” (dpa 2020). This anger about Lieberknecht’s generalisation was also expressed in personal communication with the author by pastors serving in pastoral care units at hospitals. In another reply, Bedford-Strohm also pointed out that some care home administrators had been very restrictive by not letting in pastors, priests or end-of-life doulas⁶, in part due to fear of increasing the risk of more deaths. According to him, pastors have always approached care homes to underline the need for pastoral care, and bishops and everyone in charge raised these

issues in many meetings with local and regional politicians (SWR2, 2020). A report by *Deutschlandfunk* radio highlighted that hospital administrations of two big Berlin hospital trusts refused to talk to the media about how they were dealing with dying patients during the second lockdown in November 2020, and whether they had learned lessons from the criticism that people had died alone in the spring. Usually, relatives do not have access to see their loved ones, but the hospital pastor is devoting much more of his time to Covid-19 patients now that he has protective equipment. He regularly visits and hums church hymns that some people know as he considers singing too difficult under all the protective gear (Engelbrecht 2020).

A more technical issue also played an important role in the early days of the pandemic: many care homes and hospitals did not have enough protective medical equipment for their own staff in March and early April, let alone for pastoral care workers who, in some cases, work on secondment contracts via the Evangelical or Catholic Churches (Theresa Brückner, interview, 22 August, 2020). Bishop Friedrich Kramer emphasised that “[w]e could not get hold of protective gear and testing equipment [in the early weeks, K.N.], which in some singular cases did not permit pastoral visits in some care homes” (epd 2020).

On an official level, regional churches and the EKD already had working groups for social work for the elderly for a long time. Their websites have an additional Corona-tab featuring news and information from the regional churches and the EKD about how to continue the very important care work for senior citizens during the pandemic. The pages contain very specific (health) recommendations about how to hold visits and meetings with elderly parishioners, according to the rules set out by each Land (EFA 2020; Nordkirche 2020). There is also spiritual guidance for staff members on how to deal with the Corona pandemic from a theological position. Yet it seems all these efforts were not visible enough to counter the distorted image of a church neglecting pastoral care for the elderly.

Human dignity vs. right to physical integrity

Former EKD chairperson, Margot Käßmann, chimed into the discussion about human dignity as a basic right during the Co-

6 Death doulas or End of Life
Doulas are people who support
people in the end of life process.

rona pandemic. This was in response to Wolfgang Schäuble, President of the Bundestag, and a practising Protestant, after he mentioned in an interview “when I hear that the protection of life is above all else, and everything else has to take a back step, then I have to say that this is not right in its absoluteness. Basic rights constrain themselves. If anything at all has an absolute value in the German constitution, then it is human dignity. This is inviolable. But this does not exclude that we have to die.” (Birnbaum & Ismar, 2020). In an interview with national radio *Deutschlandfunk*, Käßmann agrees with Schäuble about the constraints of the basic rights in the German constitution where article 1 refers to inviolable human dignity and article 2 refers to the right to physical integrity. Käßmann points out the ethical dilemma between these two rights, for example when families worry that their relatives in care homes might not die from the Corona virus but from loneliness and isolation. For her, it is not easy to ethically weigh the risk as to which is the higher good of the two at a particular moment (Käßmann 2020b). In early May, some Corona restrictions were lifted but visits to care homes continued to be heavily limited for relatives, with the argument of “protecting human lives”. It was then that the EKD chairperson, Bishop Bedford-Strohm, suggested that people in care homes should be able to decide for themselves, if possible, which risk they would be willing to take and whether they would like to receive visitors. He said that these restrictions put relatives in terrible agony, especially when they were not allowed to be with their parents during their final days. He noted that relatives were becoming increasingly despairing and heart-broken because they will never be able to make up for not being there (RND 2020c). In another interview, Käßmann demanded the easing of restrictions for funerals where only 10 people could be present – even outdoors. She referred to her experience as a parish pastor when she saw that it was “essential for widows, widowers or children to be surrounded by a large group of mourners, to experience this union”. She saw a discrepancy between the permitted small numbers of attendees at outdoor funerals and the larger numbers of people shopping in crowded supermarkets. According to her, “it shows respect and dignity when mourners have the opportunity to pay their final farewells at a funeral.” (Käßmann 2020a). High-profile representatives of the EKD were not silent on these complex issues but, given ethical questions rarely provide simple answers, it was difficult to get a clear message across.

Corona measures as attack on religious freedom?

There exists a broad consensus that freedom of religion is one of the most important basic rights and therefore it should only be suspended for a very limited time. Yet on 10 April 2020, the German Supreme Court rejected an appeal to lift the ban on worship services on the grounds that the protection of life and limb has supremacy – albeit for a restricted time period. (Bundesverfassungsgericht 2020) This decision raised the ire of many, with some even comparing it to the limited religious freedom in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). Bishop Friedrich Kramer of the Evangelische Kirche in Mitteldeutschland (EKM), which spans parts of the former GDR, strongly rejected such a comparison as “completely unacceptable” (*Die Welt* 2020). He pointed out that the state prime ministers in some former East German Länder had lifted restrictions and allowed worship services to take place inside churches earlier than some western Länder. He saw a specific sensitivity at work which resulted from the experience of restricted religious freedoms in the GDR (*Die Welt* 2020).

In the run-up to Easter, discussions about the ban on holding traditional Easter services in churches became tenser. Peter Hahne, a prominent former political journalist at German public service TV ZDF and a former board member of the EKD, accused the two big denominations of having “banned church services already in anticipatory obedience” (Ewert & Rotkehl 2020) in an article headlined “Open church doors for Easter”. He mused that it was weird that “beverage shops are open whereas churches are not” (Ibid.). He went further in this article stating that “a ban [of opening churches] by the state [...] is an attack on religious freedom.” (Ibid.) Later, Hahne also said that he no longer thought it was worth paying church tax since churches closed down and they only reopened to collect money. Hahne’s statements led to strong and often angry reactions by church officials as well as many worshippers.⁷

The local bishop of Osnabrück, Superintendent Joachim Jeska, criticised Hahne for ignoring the “responsible role of our church, which puts the welfare of people centre-stage, as we don’t want to expose them to the danger of infection.” (RND 2020b) The chairperson of the EKD, Bishop Bedford-Strohm, said that saving human life should be the guiding principle. He therefore accepted the temporary ban on big Easter services in churches (Unsere Kirche 2020). He also pointed out that most

⁷ For example, several letters to the editor reached the regional church newspaper *Der Sonntag* (2020) where the writers, lay people of parochial parish councils, complained about Hahne’s ignorance and strongly rejected his claims. Instead they pointed to all the innovative formats and highlighted the commitment of staff and volunteers alike to keep congregational life active during the pandemic.

regional churches had decided to cancel church services to protect human lives before the state-led lockdowns came into force. He said that “due to Christian charity we will do everything that helps to contain the virus and at the same time we will still be able to celebrate Easter together – be it via televised church services, livestreams or telephone services – the message of Easter will not be stopped.” (Unsere Kirche 2020).

Quite a number of people criticised Hahne for complaining about closed churches, when worship services in churches were only banned temporarily. Critics like Bishop Friedrich Kramer or Bishop Beate Hofmann rightly pointed out that worship had never been forbidden during the pandemic, that it was only services with worshippers inside churches that had been cancelled. Churches had remained open throughout lockdown for quiet contemplation, for prayer and for personal conversations with pastors (albeit under physical distancing rules). Pastors, church secretaries, deacons specialised in working with children and other staff, in addition to many volunteers, all helped to keep churches open, to staff telephones in parish offices, to reach out to older parishioners via phone, mail or even physically-distanced talks over the garden fence. These groups felt accused for the wrong reasons.

Role of German Media

After looking at all the criticism described above, it is noticeable that only a few prominent bishops and some outspoken critics had the chance to express their views in the mainstream media, especially newspapers and some religious affairs radio programmes. Moreover, their views were often reduced to negative snippets to attract attention. Such examples include Christine Lieberknecht’s exaggerated claim that the church neglected hundreds of thousands of dying people, and Peter Hahne’s complaint about closed churches. Bishop Bedford-Strohm reflected on this tendency in relation to the joint statement of the three Christian denominations at the beginning of the Corona crisis (Kosch & Mawick 2020). It was quite unusual that the Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox Churches issued a joint statement, but most media chose to ignore it. Perhaps editors did not understand just how exceptional such a statement was, or found it to be too non-controversial to warrant publishing. Consequent-

ly, the statement did not generate the coverage necessary to reach the faithful who did not read church weeklies. More meaningful religious discussions have been relegated to guest editorials and commentaries in a few quality newspapers and weeklies. Christiane Florin, religious affairs editor at *Deutschlandfunk*, pointed out that, in the 1980s, Protestant thinking was publicly expressed by prominent Protestant personalities, including politicians, who were not necessarily theologians or clergy. Nowadays, German media mainly focus on a few bishops and a few outliers to represent religion. This hierarchical and very clergy-focused media presentation actually runs counter to the more decentralised Protestant understanding of the “Priesthood of all believers”, where clergy and lay-people equally represent the church. Perhaps it reflects an ignorance or an increasing religious illiteracy of editors in regards to the intricacies of Protestantism. Several people mentioned the absence of representatives of the EKD or the Roman Catholic Church in the main political talk shows such as *Maybrit Illner* or *Lanz* (e.g. *Länderzeit* 2020) during most of the Corona pandemic. Johann Hinrich Claussen, cultural ambassador of the EKD, spoke of how he had a chance to talk about the church’s pastoral care during the first lockdown in the religious affairs programme “Tag für Tag” on *Deutschlandfunk*. He had the impression that this was a unique occasion where editors showed genuine interest and were not looking for an angle to create confrontation – as with Lieberknecht’s statement. Although Claussen tried to highlight the problem of the isolation of the elderly in care homes and perhaps dying alone during lockdown in other contexts with journalists, he realised that most editors did not consider the topic relevant. Only several months later did he feel that some quality media had begun to show greater interest in more “difficult” topics. Taking these examples together, it can seem a bit unfair to accuse the churches of no longer being relevant. When churches make relevant statements they are ignored if they are not sufficiently catchy, provocative or challenging. Perhaps this is because of editors’ lack of knowledge about religion/church affairs and the phenomenon that scandals and crisis will easier find their entries on news agendas.

Creative Ideas to Reach Parishioners

After the extensive discussion above, it may appear that the EKD and its affiliated 14000+ parishes have mainly struggled with the Corona pandemic. However, it would be a very incomplete picture if the success stories were left out. As soon as it became clear that churches would have to stop traditional worship services on Sundays, many pastors decided to offer services online or in different ways. Public radio *Deutschlandradio* and regional broadcasters such as WDR, SWR, RBB, MDR, etc., along with national public service broadcasters ARD and ZDF increased airtime for religious programming, especially worship services (Stalinski 2020).

There have been numerous creative ideas to bring God's word to the people and the internet is full of videos and reports. From the abundance of initiatives, only a few can be explained here: parishes offered “devotions at the garden fence” – where people could pick up prepared sermons or spiritual devotions left on the fence around the parsonage and take them home. In Rheinland-Pfalz, a local deaconess offered to come to people's gardens with her guitar and give them spiritual food for thought for about 10-20 minutes, keeping social distancing rules (Pieroth 2020). In Suhl, a city in Thuringia, the pastor visited a church-run care home for a “devotion at the garden fence” in mid-March, standing outside, singing and playing her guitar, giving some spiritual input, with the care home residents sitting on balconies wrapped in blankets and listening (Gartenzaunandacht 2020).

The Corona pandemic not only influenced regular Sunday worship and pastoral care. All parish activities were affected: confirmation classes and Sunday school could no longer take place; choral activities ranging from children's, youth, Gospel to regular church choirs had to stop; youth-worship services, get-togethers for pensioners and bible-study courses had to be cancelled. Normally, confirmations take place each spring, often on Palm Sunday or Pentecost. In 2020, most spring-time confirmations were cancelled and postponed until autumn 2020 or spring 2021. Nevertheless, some parishes decided to celebrate confirmation services for 14-year-olds outside the church building or in smaller groups (Bayer-Gimm 2020; Riesterer 2020). Even parochial council meetings, church committee meetings on the parochial level and synod meetings on the regional level were

cancelled or quickly transferred to online platforms. The author herself has been taking part in online committee meetings of her local church and her older child regularly takes part in weekly online Sunday school classes and choir practice. Due to the prescribed pausing of confirmation classes⁸ and youth worship services, staff of the Youth Ministry of the Evangelical Church in Munich, for example, came up with the project “Sexy Bibel” (EJaM Podcast). Its intention was to reach out to teenagers who had not been attracted by the more conventional online worship services. It is a 20-minute video format where stories from the bible are shown in mini clips and their meaning then discussed by staff of the youth ministry.

The “*Sieben Dörfer – Sieben Kirchen*” YouTube channel is a rather humorous collection of videos where a local pastor and a pastor-in-training talk about their church-related activities in Corona times, having to serve seven parishes in rural Brandenburg in the so-called Pfarradies⁹. They even created a dog puppet who is played by the pastor and who in the storyline is the pastor’s dog. This dog is usually in conversation with the trainee pastor and talks with him about the meaning of life or about missing the fun of not having children around for Sunday school due to lockdown. Since the dog is usually a bit cheeky, they also talk about forgiveness, etc. During the school lockdown, the pastor and the ethics teacher from the local primary school also used this channel to introduce their respective subjects (ethics or religious education) to parents and pupils before they made their subject choice for the next school year (*Sieben Dörfer*).

Older worshippers who are not familiar with digital offerings could tune in to television or radio worship services. Numbers speak for themselves: whereas pre-Corona around 700,000 viewers watched a televised worship, during the early months of the pandemic, it rose to 1.4 million viewers (Stalinski 2020). The *Wort zum Sonntag*, a televised spiritual talk, scripted in turn by the Evangelical and Roman Catholic churches, and broadcast each Saturday evening on the ARD public service channel after the main evening show, normally has around 1.25 million viewers: in March 2020, it was watched by around 2.1 million viewers (Stalinski 2020). There were even telephone devotions for people who did not have internet access, where people could call specific phone numbers to listen to the services that took place, for example in Dresden and other places (MDR.DE).

A pastor couple from the rural Emsland had been touring

8 Preparatory course before young adults have their confirmation when they are around 14-years-old.

9 Pfarradies is a humorous made-up composite noun of Pfarrer (pastor) and Paradies (paradise)

their parishes with a SUV, jokingly referred to as “Pappamobil”, a reference to the Pope’s mobile, which had a loudspeaker installed. They stopped outside care homes and on public squares to hold devotions. Viewers of the video can actually see and hear how much the villagers appreciated this activity (NDR 2020). Many parishes delivered letters, prayers or instructions for celebrating devotions at home in people’s letterboxes, or they hung little bags with words of blessing, with candles and Easter eggs at garden fences. It was an especially difficult time around Easter, the most important celebration of the church and for family gatherings. The bishop of Hannover, Ralf Meister said, “When, if not now, do we need this hope that derives from Easter: Life is stronger than death.” (RND, 2020a). The author’s parish prepared lovely designed paper bags for “Easter in a Bag”, which contained little bags for each special day filled with service sheets containing hymns and prayer: for Maundy Thursday a family ration of bread and red grape juice to celebrate Holy Communion live with the pastors via the church’s YouTube channel; a little wooden cross for Good Friday; an Easter candle for Easter Sunday to be lit “together” when watching the pastors celebrating Easter via YouTube; and a children’s story and some wooden figures to perform a children’s service on Easter Monday. Before Easter, some parishes had erected Easter crosses and they invited parishioners and everybody to decorate them with flowers and prayer requests. Church bells were tolling more often as a sign of presence. Trombone bands, which form an important part of Protestant churches by providing musical components of worship services, have played in front of parsonages or from balconies of church spires. In his monthly column “Going to church”, *chrismon* columnist, Burkhard Weitz, writes and comments about his Sunday worship experiences in different parishes around Germany. For Pentecost, he went to a drive-in-worship service at an Aldi supermarket parking lot in Frankfurt, which allowed greater attendance than in a local church since people were sitting physically distanced in their cars with open windows (Weitz 2020). In Ebersberg, Bavaria, the Lutheran minister, Edzard Everts @PfrEverts, tweets under the heading “flatten the curve”, in reference to flattening the Covid-19 infection rate, about spiritual needs and opportunities during the pandemic (Kessel 2020). Pastor Corinna Zisselsberger talked about how online worship services from her St. Marien Church in central Berlin suddenly had new participants –

viewers from different parts of the world and also older church ladies who are computer illiterate but who had asked younger people to help them watch online worship via their smartphones (Länderzeit 2020). Theresa Brückner, a Berlin pastor and in charge of the “Church in the digital sphere” programme (EKBO) in her church district, is also known as “God’s influencer” as she has a wide reach over her YouTube channel and Instagram profile @Theresaliebt. She said that she was increasingly approached for pastoral care by many of her followers on social media channels during the early days of lockdown (Theresa Brückner, interview, 22 August, 2020). According to Brückner, her followers are not all Protestant, nor Christian. After all the criticism outlined above, these examples have in fact shown a vibrant and very creative EKD at local and regional levels.

What next?

It seems that both the Protestant and Roman Catholic Church in Germany have heard some of the criticism and are trying to react to it. In Berlin, for example, both churches joined Wall AG, a big commercial advertiser, to put up 1500 billboards in waiting areas for Berlin public transport. 24,000 free postcards were also distributed in pubs and restaurants to advertise their joint “Corona-Crisis Line”. They advertised it as being available by phone from 8am to 12 midnight every day. The first ads were put up in central Berlin by the Berlin bishops of the Evangelical and Roman Catholic Churches in August. Up to five people are available at the same time when the crisis line is open. Both churches reported that, as of July, 1500 people had called in and the average duration of a call was around 24 minutes. In August, the number of callers had gone down but calling times were longer. People were increasingly concerned about a second lockdown, worried about their economic wellbeing, and struggling with loneliness and suicidal thoughts. (Lassiwe 2020) According to Michael Hillenkamp, spokesperson for the Catholic Conference for Crisis Lines, the number of callers to these helplines throughout Germany rose from 2,500 per day on 22 March 2020 to 3,200 in April (Lenz 2020). At the same time, these traditional telephone crisis lines extended their services to offer online services via chat functions and email replies. Hillenkamp also mentioned that 40 per cent of conversations were about Corona and

50 per cent more people wanted to talk about loneliness than pre-Corona (Ibid.)

After the initial shock of the first few months of the pandemic, the EKD has been taking stock of its new initiatives, but also about what went wrong so that things can be improved in the coming months. A long interview with Bishop Bedford-Strohm in the August issue of *Zeitzeichen* was one such an opportunity to talk about mistakes but also lessons learnt. He expressed his joy at the commitment of so many church staff members and volunteers in so many parishes who thought and acted quickly about how they could fulfil the fundamental mission of the church: to be with people and not leave them alone. He saw a lot of vitality and dynamism in the very same church that had been declared dead by some people some time ago. Specifically, he acknowledged that more than 80 per cent of parishes had offered worship services and devotions online (Kosch & Mawick 2020). At the same time, he acknowledged the pain of not being able to celebrate worship services in church in the physical presence of the faithful. He clearly rejected the criticism by some prominent people such as the journalist and former EKD-council member, Peter Hahne, who had demanded official and vocal protests from the churches about the temporary ban on holding traditional services. The bishop defended the official stance of not protesting loudly as being “an indispensable part of our message, the message of charity, that we [the Church, K.N.] have supported – from a standpoint of inner freedom – what the politicians in charge have tried to do throughout this time: to do as much as possible in times of uncertainty to avoid similar situations as in (...) Spain or Italy, where intensive care units were overcrowded and the dead were piled up on trucks. (...) Therefore people who reject or even sabotage all these measures which are meant to protect life, under the cover of religious freedom, are the ones who should justify themselves, not the other way around.” (Kosch & Mawick 2020).

Like the majority of Germans, most parishes were caught by surprise with the lockdown measures in mid-March. Adapting to the new situation forced many parishes to quickly change their usual routines. This released a lot of creative energy in many parishes. Suddenly, churches had to make a giant leap in their digital strategies as this was the only way forward in times of physical distancing. However, this also sapped a lot of personal energy from staff and volunteers at local level. For others who

favour a traditional pastoral model, these new digital formats and activities were superficial and didn't sit alongside their understanding of church. It does not come entirely as a surprise that several pastors and other staff members would like to return to some sense of imagined 'normalcy', pre-Corona (Brückner interview). However, many pastors and others active in the church see this as a chance to adjust the EKD and its regional member churches to the social realities of today with falling memberships. Instead of shrugging their shoulders in resignation, these advocates of change demand from their church leadership discussions about how to reach out and engage those who are not among the faithful and have no contact with the church yet.

Despite an assumption that clergy are rather hesitant to use digital formats in their work, a survey commissioned by an EKD-affiliated research institute and conducted among regional churches in June 2020, found out that 2/3 of respondents would like to keep at least some digital formats for proclamation of the Gospel, perhaps as an extension of existing services (Hörsch 2020, 47). This finding may be supported by the chairperson of the Bavarian Pastors' Association, Corinna Hektor, who suggests that the digital programme of the church, especially worship services, should be “a supplement or an extension to the existing services rather than a replacement of it” as most of the digital services so far felt “more like makeshift versions.” (Staffen-Quandt 2020). Despite the criticism of digitalisation, the temporary ban on physical gatherings for Sunday worship and other church activities has actually fast-forwarded the digitalisation of regional and local churches on an unprecedented level. If it is taken up by active media-savvy pastors and other staff and volunteers, and combined with the spreading of the Christian message on different channels, this may reach people who have not had any contact with faith or organised religion before, but who may crave spiritual meaning in their lives. Brückner talked about several colleagues who had been sceptical about her role as an influencer on social media pre-Corona. However, they have since seen her work in a different light and some had not realised how hard it is to create meaningful social media content (Brückner interview).

In early summer 2020, traditional worship services in churches started again, although worshippers had to wear masks while singing due to fear of spreading the virus. Attendance has

not increased. It is a projection of a tendency that Petra Bahr describes as the image of the empty church aisles, which has become a visual sign of the Corona pandemic (Bahr 2020). It highlights that the trend of low attendance at church services may continue because of Corona. Due to the pandemic, even those who used to attend church services may become accustomed to no longer attending regularly. She also points out how performing a service in front of a hand-held camera, with no interaction with a congregation, has had an effect on pastors, organists and all those who conduct services (Bahr 2020). So despite the yearning for a sense of normalcy, parochial life will stay in a state of uncertainty and unpredictability, as the Corona pandemic is far from being over. This is why Brückner demands that the EKD, leaders of the church at regional and local levels, as well as the synods, become more vocal about the situation, one that may continue until 2022. This would make it clearer for local parishes to plan ahead and adapt their parochial community life (Brückner interview). In the author's parish, Sunday school and children's choir activities had been very cautiously taken up again, though under strict physical-distancing rules in small groups, with attendance lists and choir activities only taking place outdoors. However, this requires extensive planning by staff, with arrangements potentially collapsing if someone was tested positive for Covid-19. Many parishioners have been very thankful for the resumption of activities but also cautious at the same time. There was a mix of excitement that some forms of activities restarted, but some staff members also expressed exhaustion. Many had worked tirelessly during lockdown to reach as many members of their congregations as possible via different channels. With the second lockdown in November 2020, many activities had to pause or were transferred again to online formats. However, due to a worse economic situation, churches now have less income via church tax, which affects parochial budgets for staff and activities. Brückner reports about a “nervousness at the top” of each church administration about reduced budgets in the coming years, which will mean an inability to invest in more jobs in pastoral work especially for the vulnerable, children, youth and the elderly.

With renewed lockdowns in place having started in November and December 2020, a new topic of discussion has arisen. Contrary to the first lockdown in March/April, worship services are allowed to take place, albeit under Covid-19 conditions,

which means that each worshipper has to leave his/her contact details and wear a mask. Seating plans are according to physically-distanced hygiene rules and, if there is any singing, it must be with masks on. Many artists and people interested in the arts complain that cinemas, theatres and concert venues, which had all invested in sophisticated hygiene standards, suffered from the second lockdown whereas churches were allowed to continue worship services. Many speak of double standards, accuse Angela Merkel of “making lobby politics in favour of churches” (Stollowsky 2020), demand the “same rules for all” and an end to the exemption of churches from lockdown measures (Betschka/Volknant 2020). For Martina Steffen-Elis, a Berlin pastor, the accusations do not make sense because “during the first lockdown we were accused of just accepting the cancellation of worship services and this time around, we are accused of not showing solidarity” (Ibid.). She and many other clergy report increasing requests for pastoral care. Johann Hinrich Claussen, in charge of culture at EKD headquarters, describes how many churches have offered their space to local artists. He rightly states that this does not compensate artists for lost income, but, nevertheless, it is a show of solidarity of getting through the pandemic together (Claussen 2020).

In conclusion, the Corona pandemic has unleashed creative energy among staff and volunteers in parishes throughout the EKD, with the aforementioned examples testament to this. In a live call-in programme, Christiane Florin, editor of the religious affairs department at *Deutschlandfunk*, pointed out “that the people who were engaged and active in pastoral care in their parishes before, accepted the pandemic as an opportunity to try new forms for reaching out to their parishioners in different ways and to reach perhaps also people who had not found their way into churches before. Whereas for some others, the image of the empty church [during the first lockdown, K.N.] has been the projected image of fear of what will be the new norm in five or ten years [when even more people will have left organised religion, K.N.]” (Länderzeit, 18.11.2020). Despite the positive examples of numerous activities, several people expressed their surprise and frustration that they never received any personal message from their parishes during the pandemic, which means that it all depends on the personal activism and engagement of staff at each parish. Moreover, there is a feeling of a certain unease among some church members, and some major criticism

by several theologians and writers, that bishops and other leaders of the church did not speak up loudly enough for the vulnerable, the sick and the dying during the pandemic – at least in its early days. This criticism was directed at the two major Christian churches in Germany. For many, it was a sad acknowledgment that the Protestant and Catholic churches are no longer perceived as relevant in answering spiritual questions about life and death in an increasingly secularised German society. Yet some clergy also see these discussions as an important wakeup call that churches must focus more on the central messages of Christianity, perhaps with the help of new digital strategies and formats, which they hope will help people in complex life situations. The lockdown measures have also shown that parochial life thrives mainly through personal encounters and friendly personal communication.

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