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Volunteering in the Protestant churches in Germany

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Thank you for the invitation to this ecumenical conference. I am really looking forward to exchanging ideas with you and to getting insights into the situation of the Danish society and churches.

As I cannot speak Danish I have been asked to give my presentation in English. I hope our communication in the lingua franca of the globalised world will go well.

In the following presentation I will focus on the role of volunteering in the Protestant churches in Germany.¹ As my time is limited I will make only a few remarks on volunteering in the German society in general.

1. Definitions

In Germany, there is no single definition for the English term “volunteering”. The terms most frequently used are: “freiwilliges Engagement” (voluntary involvement) or “Ehrenamt” (honorary work; honorary post). This comprises all activities which are voluntary and unpaid (except activities in family and neighborhood). “Ehrenamt” is the traditional term which is used in the field of volunteering, especially in the churches. It is quite common to differentiate within our churches between “Hauptamtlichen”, i.e. professional, paid staff, and “Ehrenamtlichen”, i.e. non-paid staff, who invest their time and energy in church-related activities. Another term often used in the field of volunteering is “bürgerschaftliches Engagement” (voluntary civic activity/ voluntary involvement for the benefit of the community). This is due to the fact that the “Zivilgesellschaft” or “Bürgergesellschaft” (civic society) has gained more attention and relevance in our public discourses.

2. Volunteering in Germany – some data and trends

In Germany the dominant form of association in which volunteering takes place is the “Verein” (registered not for profit organization, association, club). Furthermore the churches, welfare associations/ charities (“Wohlfahrtsverbände”) and public institutions such as schools, museums etc. play an important role. The biggest welfare associations in which many volunteers are active are the “Diakonie” (linked to the Protestant churches) and the “Caritas” (linked to the Roman Catholic church). Further organizational structures of voluntary associations are “Verbände” (associations), self-help groups (most commonly in the field of health, illness, disabilities or difficult circumstances), new social movements/independent interest groups like “Bürgerinitiativen” (citizens’ initiatives) and “Bürgerstiftungen” (community foundations).

Since 1999 a national survey on volunteering in Germany (“Freiwilligensurvey”) is compiled every five years based on 15.000-20.000 interviews. According to the latest survey of 2009, 36% of the German population are involved in volunteer work. This figure has remained stable since 1999. “Active, but without a voluntary activity” (“unverbindlich öffentlich Aktive”) are 35 %. (This category comprises persons who are “only” participating in some public activity - singing in a choir for example - and do not have tasks and functions in an

¹ In this text the German word „evangelisch“ is translated by „Protestant“, except for proper names of church institutions or agencies that officially or regularly use the term “evangelical” (as in: “Die Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland” – EKD : “The Evangelical Church in Germany”).

active volunteering role.) “Neither volunteer nor active” (“nicht öffentlich Aktive”) are 29% of the population.

Further findings of the survey are:

- the field of activity (“Engagementbereich”) in which most volunteers are engaged is the field of sports (“Sport und Bewegung”) in which 10% of the population are volunteering. The second largest sectors of volunteering are: schools/kindergartens (“Schule/Kindergarten”) and churches/religious organizations (“Kirche/ Religion”), each comprising 7% of the population
- 47% of all voluntary activities is done in “Vereinen” (registered not for profit organizations), 14% in churches and religious organizations
- more men than women are active in volunteering (40 vs. 32%). This has to do with the higher membership of men in “Vereinen” (sports clubs etc.) and organizations such as fire-brigades and life-guard services
- families with several children are more often engaged in volunteering than singles.
- more volunteers can be found in rural areas than in urban centres (40% vs. 30%)
- about one third of those who do not volunteer say they are generally willing to do so: 11% are “definitely prepared to volunteer” (“bestimmt bereit”), 26% are “possibly willing to volunteer” (“eventuell bereit”). This group shows the potential for recruiting new volunteers in Germany.
- volunteering engagement of the age group over 60 has increased considerably over the past ten years (from 31 to 37%)
- unemployed persons, persons with lower social and educational status and those with a migration background (“Migrationshintergrund”) are underrepresented in the field of volunteering
- there are two main factors that motivate people to volunteer: 1. desire to actively participate in the shaping of society; 2. desire to get together with other people and to establish social contacts
- dominant expectations of people towards volunteering are: 1. that the activity “is fun” (“macht Spaß”); 2. that by volunteering you are helping others; 3. that you are doing something for the common good; 4. that you are getting together with nice people
- when asked how they found their field of activity, for the majority the main incentive came not from special agencies and offices, but from other volunteers who perform key functions in organizations or groups or from the immediate personal environment
- volunteer work is an important informal field of learning. 45% of all volunteers report that their involvement in volunteering provides them with “important” or “very important” personal learning opportunities

According to the report “Voluntary Action in Germany – Facts and Figures by the European Volunteer Centre (CEV)”, the willingness to engage in voluntary work seems to be linked with the individual’s level of social capital (‘Social inclusion’ and employment/ education status). Such aspects include, for example: a large circle of friends and acquaintances; close links to church; gainful employment; higher education and a high professional position.

One central observation of all three national surveys on volunteering in Germany has been an alteration in the motivations for volunteering. In the past, people were dedicated to one organization, and volunteered for it most of their lives. (This traditional form of volunteering is often called “altes (=old) Ehrenamt”). In the mean-time, due to the value shift (“Wertewandel”) in the seventies, there has been a shift towards a kind of volunteering that is rather project-based, which takes place more spontaneously and which should fit the individual personal circumstances. Self-reliance and self-determination have gained

importance and since volunteering is associated with the aim of pursuing these interests, it also poses new challenges for more participation. (This type of volunteering is often called “neues (=new) Ehrenamt”.)

A study on volunteering in the European Union, not only in Germany, comes to the conclusion: “The main difficulties seem to be related to the changes that are affecting the nature of voluntary engagement, as well as a mismatch between the needs of voluntary organizations and the aspirations of the new generations of volunteers, rather than a drop in the number of volunteers. Factors include the inadequate knowledge of the needs of organizations, the difficulty in matching volunteers with appropriate organizations, preference for short rather than long-term voluntary commitments, and increases in the number of voluntary organizations which means that volunteers are spread across an even larger number of organizations.”

During the last 10 to 15 years in Germany the public awareness of the value of volunteering and civic engagement has constantly increased and has been recognized as a political priority. This is visible e.g. through the growing number of infrastructure facilities but also through the growing number of awards and prizes for volunteers.

Organizations that promote volunteering and facilitate cooperation and exchange of information are:

- Volunteer (support) centres/ agencies (“Freiwilligenagenturen”). They promote involvement in volunteering. Specific areas of activity include brokerage of volunteers and training for management of volunteers.
- Volunteer centres affiliated with welfare organizations
- Volunteer centres for elderly people (senior citizens’ offices - “Seniorenbüros”). They encourage elderly people to play an active role in society.
- (Community) Foundations
- Umbrella organizations, for example the federal association of volunteer centres (BAGFA)

Awareness raising initiatives are:

- The “Week of Civic Engagement” (“Woche des Bürgerschaftlichen Engagements”)
- The “Day of Voluntary Activity” (“Tag des Ehrenamts“) on Dec. 5th.
- - The Concept of a “Social Day” (“Sozialer Tag”), a day on which pupils engage in voluntary activities instead of going to school.

3. Volunteering in the Protestant churches in Germany

3.1. Volunteering – necessary from a financial or/and a theological perspective?

It cannot be denied that in Germany in some cases voluntary engagement is utilized for tackling problems or providing services that the state cannot or does not want to provide. And in discussions about the role of volunteering in the churches, not only church members often express their suspicion that the growing appreciation of volunteering and volunteers has primarily to do with the lack of financial resources and the decreasing number of paid staff in the churches which is caused by the decline of membership. Without doubt, to some degree and in some cases this is true. It is estimated that, if current trends continue, in 2030 the Protestant church in Germany will have one third less members and only half of its present financial means. During the last two decades, the number of congregations and church regions (“Kirchenkreise”) and of paid staff has been steadily reduced through processes of merging.

For financial reasons, church-owned buildings, parsonages and, in some cases, even churches are being sold.

The decrease of members, finances and paid staff in the Protestant churches in Germany cannot be denied, but it must not lead to a general questioning of the role of volunteering in the church. Regardless of developments in the area of finances and staff within the organized church, from a theological point of view, in the Protestant understanding of the church, voluntary involvement in church and society is an indispensable characteristic of the Christian church and of every Christian congregation. I cannot specify this now. I can only refer to biblical passages, such as: 1. Pt. 2,9; 1. Cor. 12,4-6; Rom. 12,3-8; Eph.4,11-12. In these passages the participatory aspect of church life is underscored. If we are convinced of the “priesthood of all believers”, as emphasized by the reformation, we cannot be satisfied with a “service church” (“Betreuungskirche”), which is run solely by paid staff who acts vicariously for all members. Not so much from the perspective of finances and personnel, but from the theological understanding of the church, the role of volunteering and volunteers is a question of the essential basis and future of the church. If we want to get from a mere “service church” to a more participatory church (“Beteiligungskirche”), volunteering and volunteers must have a high priority in our organization. We have to concede that the trend toward professionalization of church activities and services (in the sixties and seventies) has in some cases led to a regrettable disempowerment (“Entmachtung”) of so-called lay people in the church.

3.2. Societal conditions of volunteering in Germany

Before I describe the actual situation of volunteers in the Protestant churches in Germany, I want to draw your attention to some of the societal conditions (“gesellschaftliche Rahmenbedingungen”) which are of great influence on the opportunities and limits of volunteering in the Protestant churches in Germany. (I suppose that you have some of these societal conditions in Denmark, too.)

3.2.1 Demographic developments in Germany

Due to the extremely low birth rate in Germany, the number of potential volunteers is steadily decreasing. It is estimated that it will be reduced by a quarter until 2040. This leads to a growing competition for the “scarce good” of volunteers in our society. And as there is a market situation for volunteering in Germany, volunteers can choose where they want to get involved. While in former times churches as established traditional organizations could be confident that they would have sufficient volunteers, they must now compete on the volunteer market for committed persons.

Another demographic aspect is the continuously growing life expectancy which leads to a “society of long living” (“Gesellschaft des langen Lebens”). It is estimated that until 2030 the percentage of church members over 60 will rise from 31% to 41%. As more citizens live longer and many of these retire earlier, the group of the so-called “young old” (“Junge Alte”) is growing. The question for the churches and their congregations is: Can they tap this reservoir of potential volunteers in their “post-job” phase of life (“nachberufliche Lebensphase”)? According to a recent survey, 37% of the Protestant members of 60 years and older (the so-called generation 60+) would be willing to volunteer.

3.2.2 “Flexibilization” of labor

In Germany, the so-called flexibilization of labor has led to many precarious working situations. Many working people have to work hard to earn their living due to the rising number of low-paid jobs. This and the increasing demands on their mobility (- about one fifth of the workers are commuters - “Pendler” -) limits the chances for volunteering in many cases.

3.2.3 Differentiation of life situations and life styles

Since the seventies life situations and life styles (“Lebenslagen und Lebensstile”) have undergone a process of differentiation and pluralization. Different societal groups („Milieus“) have different preferences and dislikes, also with regard to religion and the church. In church, just like in society in general, one can find a “cultural hegemony” of certain societal groups; not everyone has an equal chance of participation. This raises the question of how belonging to a certain societal group helps or hinders the willingness for voluntary engagement in the church.

3.2.4 Development of church membership

At present, about one third of the German population belongs to the Roman Catholic church, one third to the Protestant churches, and one third is un-churched. (About 4% are Muslims.) One can no longer take for granted that the average citizen has a formal or inner binding to the church and its institutions. Moreover, the latest membership survey has shown that among Protestant church members the possibility of actively engaging oneself in the church (“die Mitarbeitsmöglichkeit“) is still the least important of all motives for membership.

If efforts to strengthen the role of volunteering and volunteers shall succeed, one has to take into account the societal conditions mentioned above.

3.3. Fields of volunteering in the Protestant churches in Germany

It is impossible to describe the whole range of voluntary activities in the Protestant churches in Germany. According to the second national survey on volunteering the main fields in this sector are: organizing and carrying out events, practical work, personal assistance, pedagogical work and group leading (“Organisation und Durchführung von Veranstaltungen; praktische Arbeiten; persönliche Hilfeleistungen; pädagogische Betreuung und Gruppenleitung”).

3.4 Basic aspects of volunteering in the Protestant churches in Germany

My impression is that the decrease of members, finances and paid staff in the Protestant churches in Germany has revived and strengthened the theological insight that volunteers are vital and indispensable for Christian churches. Since the late eighties, all regional churches (“Landeskirchen”) of the “Evangelical Church of Germany” (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland - EKD) have developed a new awareness of the role of volunteering and volunteers. There have been many discussions in synods and church headquarters, empirical studies and projects which focused on the role of the “Ehrenamt” in our church. In the following, I will try to outline some of the central findings of this process.

3.4.1 The necessity of a change of perspective (“Perspektivenwechsel”): “resource orientation” – not only “task orientation”

In the past, volunteering typically meant that a church member was given a task, elected by a staff person or a body of the church. The necessities of the organization determined the field of volunteering and set the agenda. If something was needed in the congregation, members were asked whether they were willing to do that job. It was a task-oriented and duty-oriented form of volunteering (the so-called “altes Ehrenamt”).

Without doubt, this form of task-oriented volunteering is still needed and indispensable in our churches, and there are always members who agree with this form of volunteering. But experience has shown, due to the value shift among citizens and church members, many potential volunteers are not satisfied with this approach. They expect their interests to be respected and that they can use and contribute their specific competences and abilities, regardless of proclaimed needs and tasks within the congregation (the so-called “neues Ehrenamt”).

Therefore, if the churches do not want to neglect and abandon this potential group of volunteers they must move from a mere task orientation (“Aufgabenorientierung”) to forms of resource orientation (“Ressourcenorientierung”). Those responsible in the church must ask: Which resources, abilities, capabilities, talents and qualifications do potential volunteers have and what can our institution offer them? This means a change of perspective on part of those who decide about the possibilities of engaging in the church, e.g. pastors, deacons (“Diakone”) and presbyters. Too often the qualifications and talents of the so-called “rank and file” members, gained in their everyday life or in their job experience, are overlooked and remain untapped.

3.4.2 The challenge of matching volunteers with the church organization

If one takes the new perspective of “resource orientation” seriously, the problem of “matching” (“Passung”) becomes important, i.e. the matching of the interests and qualifications of the potential volunteer with the interests of the church organization as seen by those in charge. While the needs and motives of volunteers have changed, in many cases the fields offered for engagement have not. The plurality of life situations and biographies of potential volunteers asks for a precise look at their individual personal circumstances if their volunteering shall be satisfying for both sides.

3.4.3 Change in the role of the pastor

In the Protestant churches in Germany, pastors still have a key role for a number of reasons. Therefore it is critical which attitude this professional group has toward volunteering and volunteers. Some pastors are perhaps afraid that strengthening the area of volunteering means weakening their own position within the congregation. But experience has shown: Strengthening volunteering by no means relativizes the service of paid staff. It rather means a necessary and helpful extension of the role of the pastor: He need not look at volunteers as a threat to his position or as dependent helpers or mere substitutes. Rather, he can see the recruitment and support (“Begleitung”) of volunteers as a main challenge for paid staff and a basic aspect of his role. Consequently, in the regional church of Württemberg the recruitment and support of volunteers has been declared one of five central aspects of the role of a pastor. Pastors (and other paid staff) are needed as reliable contact persons (“Ansprechpartner”) and partners for volunteers.

Until recently, management of volunteers has not been an element of the education of pastors. But it must become an indispensable part of pastoral training if the new appreciation for volunteering is taken seriously.

3.4.4 Respect for the autonomy of volunteers

Due to the value shift in our society, autonomy, self-reliance and self-determination have become important. In the field of volunteering this means the demand for participatory structures has grown. Many volunteers are no longer satisfied to simply execute what members of the paid staff order them to do. Participation for them means sharing power. Recently, I saw an impressive example of this respect for the rights and the autonomy of volunteers: In a Lutheran congregation in Berlin-Neukölln nearly 200 volunteers have a master-key to the church-center!

3.4.5 Need for clear structures and adequate conditions

A decisive factor for the satisfaction of volunteers in the church is the existence of clear structures and adequate conditions for their voluntary activities. A volunteer must know: How is my field of activity defined? Will my volunteer work be only occasional or limited to a project or on a more consistent basis? What is the amount of time I have to invest? Which are my rights and my duties? What can I expect from the organization I am working for? What are the responsibilities on both sides? Who is my reference person in the organization? To whom am I responsible? Are there clear agreements concerning the beginning and the potential end of my commitment? Do I have sufficient means for my task? Do I get a reimbursement of my expenses? Am I insured as a volunteer?

3.4.6 Importance of a culture of recognition (“Anerkennungskultur”)

Recognizing voluntary activities can play a big part in rewarding existing volunteers for their commitment and in attracting new volunteers. As volunteers invest their time and energy into their voluntary work without financial compensation they need non-monetary forms of recognition. All empirical studies show: this is a crucial point which may decide whether volunteers can be retained or whether they will quit their work. For most volunteers the recognition of their work by the paid staff and governing bodies (e.g. church council) is very important. But too often volunteering is taken for granted or overlooked by paid staff. In the German churches the need for a reliable culture of recognition is often verbalized, but in many cases it is not put into practice.

3.4.7 Education and training opportunities for volunteers

For many (not all) church-related voluntary activities education and training is helpful or even needed. Volunteers often come to realize that they need more knowledge and skills for their work. In these situations they must not be left alone, but be supported by offering them opportunities for education and training. Such measures are also a way of recognition of their voluntary commitment.

3.4.8 Cooperation with volunteer support agencies

In Germany, the growing appreciation of volunteering and volunteers has led to the formation of volunteer agencies (“Freiwilligenagenturen”) which advise citizens about possibilities for volunteering and offer training for management of volunteers. Experience has shown that

churches and congregations as well as volunteers can profit from cooperation with these agencies if they don't consider them rivals on the volunteer market. Cooperation can open ways to other organizations and initiatives and contribute to services to the larger civil society.

3.4.9 Recruitment of new volunteers? – A Challenge

About 11 % of the German citizens who do not volunteer at the moment say that they are definitely prepared to take up voluntary activities. How can they be approached successfully by the churches?

Most of the volunteers in the Protestant church are church members who have strong or moderately strong ties to the church ("starke oder mittlere Kirchenbindung"). As one third of the German population is un-churched, the question is: What can be done so that un-churched men and women can find areas of commitment within the church? My observation and personal experience is that diaconal activities of the church are often an attractive field of volunteering for persons who are alienated from other aspects of the Christian churches.

Another group of citizens who needs more attention in the field of volunteering are ethnic minorities.

4. For example: Volunteering programs and projects in the regional Lutheran church of Hannover

In order to give you an insight into practical attempts to promote volunteering within the church, I will finally briefly outline the situation in my own "Landeskirche", the regional Lutheran church of Hannover ("Evangelisch-lutherische Landeskirche Hannover"). This church covers the greatest part of the state of Lower Saxony. With its 3 million members it comprises 1.200 congregations in which about 26.000 men and women are paid staff and 116.000 men and women are doing voluntary work.

During the last years several deliberate steps have been taken to strengthen the role of volunteering and volunteers in our church:

In 2002 and 2005 paragraphs were added to the constitution of the "Landeskirche" ("Kirchenverfassung", Art. 1,4) and to the constitution of the congregations ("Kirchengemeindeordnung", §24a) and of the church regions ("Kirchenkreisordnung", §23), in which the role and the rights of volunteers were emphasized, specified and enlarged. (*A Danish translation of these paragraphs is available on an extra sheet.*)

In 2005 a strategy paper ("Perspektivpapier") was ratified by the synod of our church in which three fields were named as areas of special efforts and investments in the future: 1. Education ("Bildung"), 2. Youth; 3. Voluntary work ("Ehrenamt"). This paper states: "According to the insight of the reformation, all Christians must participate in the realization of the mission of the church and decide about the concrete form of the church. (...) The voluntary engagement is fundamental for the church as a participatory church and is valued." ("Das ehrenamtliche Engagement ist grundlegend für Kirche als Beteiligungskirche und wird wertgeschätzt.") Consequently, the synod provided financial means for the promotion of volunteer work and volunteers.

In 2006/2007 the "Project Volunteering" ("Projekt Ehrenamt") was carried out in which the situation of volunteering in 12 congregations and 1 church region was analyzed. The insights of this field study were summarized in "12 standards for volunteering" ("12 Standards für das

Ehrenamt"). (*Danish translation available on extra sheet.*) These criteria are formulated for church institutions/ congregations and for church-related diaconic institutions alike. In 2008 the church office of our regional church ("Landeskirchenamt") – in cooperation with the division "Volunteer work and leadership in congregations" of the "House of church services" ("Arbeitsfeld Ehrenamt und Gemeindeleitung im Haus kirchlicher Dienste") - published a "Conception for the promotion of volunteering in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hannover" ("Konzeption für die Förderung ehrenamtlicher Arbeit in der Evangelisch-lutherischen Landeskirche Hannovers"). This paper aims at a "community of service" („Dienstgemeinschaft“) of volunteers and paid staff. Two aspects are central to this paper: 1. Promotion of volunteering ("Förderung ehrenamtlicher Mitarbeit"); 2. Qualifying of paid staff concerning volunteers ("Qualifizierung beruflich Mitarbeitender im Blick auf Ehrenamtliche"). In 2010 the "Handbook of Volunteering" ("Handbuch Ehrenamt") was published by our church office (in cooperation with the "Academy for Volunteering"= Akademie für Ehrenamtlichkeit, Berlin).

In the division "Volunteer work and leadership in congregations" in Hannover, one pastor and two deacons are employed to promote and qualify volunteering as it was agreed upon by the synod and outlined in the conceptual paper.

4.1 Training of paid staff members for management of volunteers ("Freiwilligenmanagement für beruflich Mitarbeitende")

As mentioned above, for most members of paid staff the management of volunteers is a central and indispensable aspect of their role. Not only because the satisfaction of volunteers with their work often depends on the support ("Begleitung") by reference partners in the paid staff. The division for volunteer work offers training programs for pastors and deacons (and other paid church staff) to remove deficits in the management (e.g. recruiting, accompanying and retaining) of volunteers. These persons which are sent by their church regions ("Kirchenkreise") have to attend several courses, develop a project, write a thesis paper and undergo an oral exam in order to become a "volunteer manager" ("Freiwilligenmanager"). In order to strengthen the cooperation of paid staff and volunteers, the division for volunteer work also offers joint trainings for members of both groups.

4.2. Coaching and supervision for volunteers in leading positions ("Coaching und Supervision für leitende Ehrenamtliche")

The division for volunteer work helps "lay" people in leading church positions to find a coach or supervisor for their responsible work. Coaching and supervision are free of charge.

4.3. Coordinators of volunteer work in the congregation ("Gemeindliche Ehrenamtskoordinatoren")

On the level of local congregations, the conceptual paper recommends to mandate one or more persons with the coordination of voluntary work and volunteers. A coordinator ("Ehrenamtskoordinator"/ "Ehrenamtskoordinatorin" - EKO) is a reference person for all volunteers, he or she responds to the wishes of the volunteers, organizes fields for volunteering and reports to the church council. Coordinators are qualified through weekend seminars run by the division for volunteer work .

4.4. Commissioners for volunteers in the church region ("Kirchenkreisbeauftragte für Ehrenamtliche")

On the level of church regions („Kirchenkreise“) the synods („Kirchenkreistage“) elect commissioners for volunteers („Ehrenamtsbeauftragte“). As reference persons for volunteers on the regional level, they are members or permanent guests in the regional synod and regularly report to this body. (KKO §23 Abs. 2, 10)

4.5. Certificate of voluntary activities ("Engagement- und Kompetenznachweis")

In the state of Lower Saxony volunteers can get a certificate documenting their voluntary activities and competences gained ("Kompetenznachweis für Ehrenamtliche"). This certificate can also be issued by church organizations and may be helpful for applications.

5. Final remarks

As I come to the end of my presentation, I would like to make two remarks:

First, regardless of demographic and financial developments and growing competition on the volunteer market, I am convinced that the future of volunteering and volunteers in the church depends on the way in which the paid staff, above all the pastors, understand the meaning and role of the Christian church.

Second, volunteering is of eminent importance if - instead of looking at it as a means to let people work without pay - we understand it as a way of contributing to the future of a humane and socially conscious society.

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