

Resource materials for the keynote paper

I was a
stranger

and you
welcomed me

Talking about people's fear of strangers

Migration and rightwing populism in Europe. Xenophobia must be opposed and we have to be able to talk about the fear of strangers

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The issue and why it is worth exploring

- Migration has existed in Germany and Europe for many decades. Churches have worked for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers for many years. In 2015 a high number of refugees migrated to Germany from the Middle East. Besides the great readiness to help many people became anxious and fearful of our society taking in too many foreigners. Church districts and parishes were not spared this tendency. Besides the many good experiences with the 'culture of welcome' there have been some bad experiences with refugees as well. There are experiences of failure, abuse and exploitation. Also among refugees there are people who deceive, lie and abuse the readiness to help. There are also bad experiences with migration in advice centres, among volunteers, in the support given by church social services. And – in parishes and church districts there are also people who reject migrants, refugees and asylum seekers for fear of foreigners or for other reasons. This is often a taboo topic in church circles. But it must be possible to talk about it.
- Since the European refugee crisis of 2015, rightwing populist parties in all EU member states have used the population's fears and concerns to incite bad feeling against refugees and migrants.
- Wrong pictures of Islam and migrants are used to justify a policy of closed borders. The different groups of asylum seekers, refugees and migrants are often lumped together; the causes of refugee and migrant movements to Europe are not differentiated, nor are the situations in the different EU member states.
- As we engage with migration and rightwing populism in Europe we should aim to put across detailed information about European asylum law and the Dublin system, the Geneva Refugee Convention and the different forms of rightwing populism in individual EU member states. We should explain and unmask the xenophobic attitudes of European rightwing populists, also presenting examples of church initiatives in refugee work and migrant-friendly commitment.

Propositions and text modules from the keynote paper

- "People are unsettled by changes in their life environment caused by migration, and this is leading to parts of the population closing themselves off to the issue. This should be addressed very seriously. Racism and xenophobia are also present in church parishes. It is all the more important for churches to defend people who are exposed to attacks for motives deriving from rightwing extremism or xenophobia. Church statements on inhuman positions must be objective and draw the 'red line' between freedom of opinion, on the one hand, and rightwing extremism, anti-Semitism, racism and agitation of the masses, on the other. The church should raise the justified concerns of refugees and of disadvantaged locals. Social problems such as growing poverty, segregation and lack of participation must be clearly named: The parishes have premises that can be used for open communication and discussion. People should not only be encouraged to talk about their faith. They should also be able to talk about their fears and worries about the future. The church should be a place free of fear in which different opinion can be uttered – with respect for those who think differently. It is important to run educational programs to strengthen democracy at the different church locations with their respective target groups (childcare centers and youth clubs, schools, church adult and family education, men's and women's groups, Protestant conference centers etc.). Furthermore, it is important to boost the intercultural competence of staff and foster the cultural opening of churches and parishes" (4.4 Taking a position, PDF page 52).
- Further church positions on the topic: press release of the 2017 EKD synod: www.ekd.de (accessed on 9.1.2019) – (our translation) "RIGHTWING POPULISM: Synod calls on Protestant Christians to resolutely oppose rightwing extremism and populism – also in their own ranks. ... Existing church law should be fully used to ensure that persons with rightwing extremist, racist or xenophobic ideas are excluded from election to a church office. Furthermore the intercultural competence of its own staff should be increased."

Questions for group discussion

- What is rightwing populism in the church and how is it expressed?
- How can we deal with common stereotyping?
- How does the church act towards AfD members?
- What arguments are raised against foreigners?
- What anxieties and fears underlie xenophobia?
- What anxieties are expressed?
- What fears remain unexpressed?
- How can we act towards rightwing populism in the church?
- What are the church's counter-positions?
- How can a migrant-friendly policy be justified from the Bible?
- How can we link up with other opponents of rightwing populism in civil society?

Recommendations for discussing the topic

- Stay cool and matter-of-fact.
- Create spaces for encounter and opportunities for dialogue with migrants.
- In political education, draw particular attention to the rapid succession of political decisions. There are no quick and easy solutions.
- Put up with differences in positions, perceptions, experiences and arguments.
- Divide the whole issue into sub-topics, describing and discussing practical problems (Geneva Convention, humanitarian assistance, asylum law problems, experiences and causes of displacement and migration, crisis and war areas, deconstruction of the populist term 'the people', pro-European positions, visions of Europe's future: solidarity, sustainability, opposing xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism ...)

Materials and media

- Thoughts on how the Evangelical Church of Westphalia (EKvW) deals with rightwing extremism, anti-Semitism, racism, xenophobia, Villigst, 2016, www.kircheundgesellschaft.de/fileadmin/Dateien/Bilder/Slider/Strategiepapier_gesamt_.pdf
- Materials of the federal working group on church and rightwing extremism, bagkr.de/publikationen
- Dossier on rightwing populism, Federal Agency for Civic Education www.bpb.de/politik/extremismus/rechtspopulismus
- Materials from the academy on violence, Villigst, www.gewaltakademie.de/aktuell
- Mercator Forum Migration and Democracy, 2018 Annual Report, Rightwing populism and Migration in Europe (in German), Dresden, 2018
- Jacques Delors Institute / Berlin, www.delorsinstitut.de
- "What is rightwing populism?" – an explanatory video, youtu.be/aIHpxnIKk-8
- EduCouch, Activists against rightwing populism, youtu.be/Esebr16_hG8

Practical ideas

- Organise a local pilgrimage to places of pain and strength – from hostility to friendliness towards strangers.
- Hold discussion training on how to deal with xenophobia and rightwing populists.
- Offer discussions in parishes with rightwing populist voters.
- Hold an event prior to the European Parliament elections on "subscribing to Europe's democratic tradition".
- "What can be done about rightwing populists in the church?" Hold discussions on this topic in parishes and church districts.
- Link up and meet with other actors in civil society.
- Hold public events on "How does the church handle rightwing populist and AfD positions?" and "At what points do AfD positions contradict a Christian view of humankind?"

- Hold events on the topic prior to the presbytery elections in 2020
- Produce a beer mat against stereotyped pub talk (countering prejudices with facts)
- Kirchentag 2019: browse through the programme to pinpoint events on xenophobia and rightwing populism.
- Hold ecumenical events with Roman Catholics and other local denominations.

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