



Fachhochschule für
Interkulturelle Theologie
Hermannsburg

Does the Church need intercultural theology?

An open letter of the University of Applied Sciences for Intercultural Theology Hermannsburg (FIT), addressed to the leaderships of its carrier foundation and the sponsoring churches about the decision taken on the 09.03.2021 to close the university

Over the past few weeks, many people, especially those committed to an intercultural opening of their churches and to a contemporary biblical understanding of ecumenism and witness, have contacted us, sharing our disappointment and indignation about the decision to close the recently founded University of Applied Sciences. This encourages us to continue offering high quality education to young people from churches and religious communities worldwide, for as long as possible. We are particularly pleased that our students, who over the past years have come to recognize the value of our work for their professional and personal lives, have initiated two public petitions addressed to the management of the Evangelical Lutheran Mission in Lower Saxony (ELM) and the synods of the three sponsoring churches of the ELM.

With this letter we would like to once again promote our academic field and highlight its importance for Church and society. Furthermore, we would like to ask colleagues to demonstrate their solidarity with us - from the perspective of their respective disciplines.

What is and what does FIT do?

The state-accredited University of Applied Sciences for Intercultural Theology Hermannsburg, supported by the Evangelical Lutheran Mission in Lower Saxony (ELM), has been committed to establishing diversity sensitivity in church and society since 2012. It offers two Bachelor degree programmes and a Master degree programme, the latter in cooperation with the Georg August University of Göttingen. The aim of the programmes is to enable students from different contexts to study, practice-oriented, topics of worldwide ecumenism.

The Bachelor degree programme 'Intercultural Theology, Migration and Global Cooperation' reflects theologically, ecclesiological and sociologically on migration as a formative element of church and society, while the Bachelor degree programme 'Intercultural Theology and Diaconia Global' focuses on ecumenism from an international diaconal perspective. Both degree programmes deal with intercultural theology and hermeneutics, interreligious dialogue and leadership issues. Both include an internship semester. The Master degree programme 'Intercultural Theology', accredited in Göttingen, includes study topics such as intercultural methodology and postcolonial theological approaches and a research semester.

The FIT is unique in Germany. Currently, students from 24 countries are studying at FIT, including a small number of Muslim students and students of other faiths and world views. Courses and campus offer good opportunities for intercultural and interreligious living and learning. The degree programmes are open to all and equip students for new professions in church, diaconia and society. They are particularly addressing interested persons from the 23 partner churches of the ELM, which supports accepted students with scholarships.

Significance of the closure for Church and society

On March 9th 2021, the Mission Committee, the supervisory body of the ELM, made the decision to close FIT after a transitional period of 4 - 5 years. Financial reasons were given as the main reason for the decision.

We, the co-workers of FIT, see this as a fundamentally wrong decision. Academic training at FIT, inter alia, involves the development of intercultural and interreligious competences. Giving up such a kind of training means giving up on competences much needed in increasingly diverse societal and ecclesial settings.

Scriptures of the New Testament depict intercultural congregations as the usual scenario. FIT study programmes bring together students from different religious and denominational, especially charismatic-Pentecostal, backgrounds. Ecumenism is understood in a much broader sense than classical denominational ecumenism. The search for foundations and forms of Being church together as well as Living faith together forms a central part of our theological education.

For most member churches of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), congregations with a high degree of diversity are the exception. However, the Freiburg study, among others, shows that a primarily mono-ethnic church is not sustainable. The sponsoring churches of the ELM (Hanover, Brunswick, Schaumburg-Lippe), by offering FIT graduates permanent job placements and involvement in projects and new endeavours, can position themselves in a new, open-minded, racism-critical and international-ecumenical way and practice intercultural open-mindedness at different levels, thus becoming a more 'welcoming church'¹.

Intercultural theology has many components, inter alia the critique of dominant readings and the encouragement to 'live' theology. FIT enables a multi-perspectival and dialogical reflection of the Christian faith, in cooperation and face to face with, representatives of various other faith backgrounds. FIT promotes diversity sensitivity and follows a justice-oriented approach. By doing so, it closes a gap as theological faculties are often more focused on classical exegetical education. Through their practice-oriented studies, FIT students are empowered to promote equal participation and involvement of immigrant people in Church and society. A high proportion of FIT graduates work in diaconal organizations, church congregations, foundations, municipalities and non-profit associations advising, counselling and guiding

¹ See article 10 (1) Church Constitution of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Hanover from the year 2000.

young migrants and refugees. Others do important integrative and communicative work as leaders of migrant churches or in intercultural projects. The relevance and the great potential of these activities is demonstrated by the following figures:

There are 20.8 million people with a so-called migration background living in Germany. About 55% of the immigrants and their children consider themselves Christians. About 14 to 16 % of all people with a migration background are members of Protestant regional churches, about 3 to 4 % belong to other Protestant churches (local free churches and migrant churches). 10% of the congregation members of the EKD (approx. 2.4 million) have a migration background.²

The church landscape in Germany is characterized by, inter alia, "about 2,000 – 3,000 Protestant international congregations, 460 Roman Catholic mother-tongued congregations and about 450 Orthodox or Oriental-Orthodox congregations which have been established by immigrants."³ These congregations, acting as bridge-builders and agents of inclusion, fulfil numerous social-diaconal tasks. FIT and its Bachelor degree programmes offer students a theological-diaconal education that prepares its graduates for work in such settings with high diversity. At the same time, the 'International Congregations' come into view as protagonists with whom the established diaconal organizations and institutions of the sponsoring churches can and need to cooperate.

In order to master current and prospective challenges, not only politicians, but also in particular the Church must address issues of immigration, interculturality, intercultural opening, participation and involvement and develop mediating solutions. If the Church does not address these issues, it will continue to lose relevance.

In conclusion, we would like to emphasize that many member churches of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) have a basic ecumenical understanding anchored in their constitutions. For example, the church constitution of the Evangelical- Lutheran Church of Hanover [Art. 1(3)] states that "proclamation, witness and service shall take place in communion with other Christian churches and in the sign of God's faithfulness to the Jewish people."⁴ We appeal to the churches to take these legal foundations seriously.

Request for action

On behalf of FIT, we ask the leadership of the sponsoring churches of the ELM to (re)put the issue of Ecumenical Theological-diaconal education on the agenda of their respective synods.

² Cf. Bendix Balke, Handlungsempfehlungen, in connection with: Abschlussbericht der Projektstelle „Gemeinden anderer Sprache und Herkunft“ vom 20.08.2020 (pdf, unpublished); cf. Bendix Balke, Religiöse Zugehörigkeit von Zugewanderten. Zahlen und Hintergründe, Interkulturelle Theologie 1/2020, 112- 134.

³ <https://internationale-gemeinden.de/en/what-do-we-mean-with-an-international-congregation>, retr. 14.05.2021.

⁴ Article 1(3) Church Constitution of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Hanover from the year 2000 (tranl. Birgit Flader, FIT).

We request the synods a) to (re)consider a sustainable, continued funding of such education, and b) to engage issues of intercultural opening of their own churches. We, the faculty members of the university, would happily partake in such deliberations.

Should it prove impossible to obtain funding from the ELM sponsoring churches' budgets over and above funding allocated for the running of the ELM, we request that the Chairman of the Mission Committee, Bishop Ralf Meister, and the Director of the ELM, Pastor Michael Thiel, work towards establishing a round table, with the help of e.g. the Evangelical Mission Worldwide (EMW), so that stakeholders can come together to discuss options for Ecumenical Theological-diaconal education at a central location in Germany, jointly financed by mission agencies and Regional churches('Landeskirchen').

"It is normal to be different. We want inclusion".⁵ This is the title of a publication of the Evangelical Church in Germany that promotes a diversity-sensitive opening of theology, church and congregation. The University of Applied Sciences for Intercultural Theology is, from a migration and justice perspective, working towards such an opening - and would very much like to continue doing so.

On behalf of the FIT faculty

Prof Dr Andreas Kunz-Lübcke (Dean of Administration)

Prof Dr Gabriele Beckmann (Dean of Studies)

Prof Dr Wilhelm Richebächer (Rector)

Hermannsburg, 11 May 2021

<https://www.fh-hermannsburg-eng.landeskirche-hannovers.de/>

⁵ Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, Es ist normal, verschieden zu sein. Wir wollen Inklusion, Leipzig, 2019 (transl. Birgit Flader, FIT).