

Church Asylum Anniversary in Germany

Bev Thomas

I would like to thank you for the privilege of addressing you today and for the incredible ecumenical work you have achieved by being selfless. In listening to the journey and plight of strangers to Germany you have transformed the life of others, equally you have also touched and changed the lives of the community that have cared, campaigned and spoken for them. This work has helped each to intimately touch their own humanity.

Some friends of mine wrote a song that was very popular in the 1990's in the UK

I will speak out for those who have no voices.
I will stand up for the rights of all the oppressed;
I will speak truth and justice,
I'll defend the poor and the needy,
I will lift up the weak in Jesus' name.

I will speak out for those who have no choices,
I will cry out for those who live without love;
I will show God's compassion
To the crushed and broken in spirit,
I will lift up the weak in Jesus' name.¹

I am reminded by a statement of Dr Alan Redpath, one of my educators at theological college 'Christian don't tell lies, we sing them.' I am genuinely overwhelmed that this song can be sung within this context as it is a reality of the work that has been accomplished here. Twenty years of BAG asylum in churches and Thirty years of the sanctuary movement in Germany. Thank you for your faithfulness.

1920 in the United States of America, the third generation of German immigrants from Bonn welcomed a new addition to the family, a baby girl. Her father was of Jamaican descent. I can imagine eyebrows would have been raised at a child of mixed heritage at that the time of segregation. History tells me that there would have been a level of hostility in some communities. Her mother later married another man and for the safety of the child altered documents and moved across the border to Canada. She grew up with other siblings not knowing this story until recently. Borders have played a significant part in my family history, the church and Christians has been the sanctuary needed to listen, learn, fight and help heal the scars

Two weeks ago I had the privilege of meeting this ladies granddaughter my maternal cousin in London for the first time. We laughed and cried together as we told stories of people movement and displacement in our family and how this has affected us. Incidentally, my cousin and I found each other on the internet, we are both amateur genealogists. At a glance you would have no idea that we were related to one another, but our DNA profile would tell you otherwise. Globally we are connected by wifi, wirelessly we can feed our mind about our neighbour without making eye contact. Emotionally and physically we can be

¹ Dave Bankhead, Sue Rinaldi, Ray Goudie & Steve Bassett
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detached from individual stories of the journey that leads to the threat of displacement and deportation.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights² first adopted in 1948 is a document I keep referring back to in the light of the atrocities I read and engage with. It speaks of the rights of all members of the human family. However many still see humanity as black or white and border lines can be open or shut dependent on the nationality of an individual. What some fail to acknowledge is our unknown inner connections.

Remembering is very much a part of the Christian tradition, I am often surprised and distressed by the histories I have read and what I see unfolding in our communities. It can sometimes be said we have collective amnesia.

On a trip to Cambridge to teach, I notice on arrival that there was a cue of taxis waiting at the station, I have done this trip over many years, this was unusual, I would normally have to wait for a car. Seated for my fifteen minute journey, I asked the driver why there were so many taxis parked. I was not prepared for what I heard, he launched into a speech that I am sure he had given many times before.... The Asian men have come here in great numbers to steal our jobs..... I guess you have heard something like this before. I listened to him quietly for the whole journey, before paying him I asked if he had a minute for me to respond. I had picked up he had an Irish accent. History tells me that on some houses for rent in the 1950s and 60s in the UK there was a notice that said 'No Blacks, No Irish, No Dogs' Interesting I said, people spoke about my parents like this when they came to this county over fifty years ago I also believe they had the same conversation about your relatives too. He apologised immediately profusely, telling me he had not meant to be offensive and was sorry. My response was - please do not forget your history treat people as you choose to be treated. Something intrigued me about our exchange, in his eyes I was not one of them, I was one of us..... When did that happen to me?

Church Asylum and the Sanctuary Collation Movements give the invitation - come and be one with us as we support you and challenge decisions made around deportation. We have created a new border, sending a strong message that people who seek refuge and those seeking asylum are welcome in our communities. It not only protects people seeking asylum from their national state, but also the state authority that does not recognise them as 'refugees' and seeks to arrest and deport.

The concept of church asylum is not new, historical documents will support the fact that Roman Emperor Arcadius and Honorius gave the right of asylum to the Christian church by edict in 399³.

Your website states that currently there are 135 known church shelters and at least 244 people including 72 children in church asylum, 122 of which are Dublin cases. Over the years hundreds if not thousands will testify of the practical help, work and life that have been given to them by your church community. . On August 30 1983 Cemal Altun⁴ a twenty three year old man of Turkish descent seeking asylum in Germany ended his life by jumping out of a window of a Berlin

² <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

³ Edict of Emperor Arcadius and Honorius on 399 (Kimmnich1983:15)

⁴ <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b6f7c.html>

court building. He took this devastating step as he believed deportation was imminent and he did not want to face the threat of political persecution in his homeland. The local church that had worked with him on his application was left devastated and I am sure confused. Cemal's tragic death within months had given life to three Palestinian families who were facing deportation to Lebanon. The same local church embraced and took them into church asylum. This I believe is the first church asylum incident that we are commemorating.

Church asylum builds the bridge of intervention between political conflict and individual human sufferings. The multi faceted ways in which the church offers compassionate hospitality for people who are facing wrongful deportation to volatile situations include:-

- Space to live their everyday lives
- Health care
- Donating & Fundraising
- Legal representation
- Meeting spiritual needs
- Education
- Language study
- Public relations

Most if not all of these needs are met by volunteers, sometimes at their own personal cost.

In 1994, the German Ecumenical Committee on Church Asylum was founded and you have grown from strength to strength. I have seen firsthand the work and tireless commitment of individuals and communities over the last four years during my visits to Germany. You have walked hand in hand with the pain, you have listened carefully to understand and developed a movement that although some may consider is in the margins, has become known to civic society here in Germany, through your public relations and networking. There is no doubt in my mind that this work will continue to be effective. However there are also other voices in the public domain in Europe that want to instil fear into the host community and restrict who can cross borders.

The people known as the 'Lampedusa in Hamburg's have recently given another public face to some of the atrocities people flee from and the danger they put themselves in to reach Europe's borders. Around 80 of the men found sanctuary in St Pauli church.

Why is it necessary that we have church asylum?



Scripture has much to teach us and is full of examples of people crossing borders, the mistreatment of the vulnerable and the need to welcome the strangers and foreigners without suspicions. It is central to the mission and ministry of the church that we reach out to the persecuted and marginalised and stand in solidarity with them on their struggles, fears, hopes and dreams

We are called to be a prophetic witness, to speak out against oppression and injustice, this should include asking question concerning policies and attitudes that embrace intolerance and dehumanise individuals. How can we love our neighbour as we love ourselves if we do not engage with the laws that discriminate and incarcerate others unfairly?

Christian communities across Germany and Europe have made invaluable and substantial contribution to people who seek asylum and refuge. We are prominent in our communities among those welcoming and calling for inclusion. Forrester asserts 'This kind of theology is rooted in the real world and its issues and its suffering. It is intended to arouse conviction and lead to action. It cares for people more than for intellectual coherence or literary elegance or academic respectability'⁶

Pastor Martin Niemoller's poem 'First they came...' gives us a chilling indication of how the world changes very quickly and the need to care and stand up.

First they came for the Communists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Communist
Then they came for the Socialists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Socialist
Then they came for the trade unionists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a trade unionist
Then they came for the Jews
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Jew
Then they came for me
And there was no one left
To speak out for me

I was born in the UK, the world I knew as a child and the world I inhabit as an adult are very different. I am currently aware that over three million people are now displaced because of the war in Syria, a leader of a recognised political party made an astonishing u-turn after his comment 'that everyone in the West had a responsibility to offer refugees sanctuary' upset his party members he then suggested that Britain should only take Christian refugees from war torn Syria. A comment I find highly offensive, but sadly is one shared by some.

Individuals who have lived through war can help us to comprehend the horrific situation and tragic human conditions that people endure if we listen with the intent to understand, rather than listen with the intent to reply⁷. We also need to ensure that they have full participation in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the projects and services provided.

⁶ Forester 2001:72

⁷ Stephen R. Covey, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change



Our news can sometimes sanitise the real stories or lead us to consider a single narrative for a nation or people group that is misleading. We need to encourage and sometimes educate our government to pursue and embrace 'ethical foreign policy' with a particular concern for the places people are forced to leave because of persecution or extreme poverty.

We do this because it is right to do! It is our human and Christian responsibility. This is not an event, but a worldwide movement of saving lives. For every one that reaches European borders, many more have died.

My family is made up of communities of refugees, some of whom have lost their lives, others fleeing from violations of their human rights, some relocating for economic reasons. I am sure you would know most of the histories associated with this. I recently wrote to a man in Australia, suggesting we have family members in common. We use the same computer programme for documenting our family tree. Interestingly we could both also see pictures of each other when making contact. In response to my email I got a short note stating it was impossible! I knew I was correct as I had all the historical documents. My relative born in Jamaica had a very light complexion, at birth he was described as a 'free quadroon', on the ship records as 'white' and his national identity was recorded as British instead of British West Indies. Later he wrote back to me and apologised for his short sightedness.

Dr Martin Luther King in his book – A Gift of Love, warns us of the tragedy of limiting neighbourly concern to people who look as if they are from the same tribe, ethnic group class or nation as ourselves. He suggests there is spiritual short sightedness of seeing people as Jews or Gentile, Catholic or Protestant, Chinese or American. 'We fail to think of them as fellow human being made from the same basic stuff as we, moulded in the same divine image'⁸ We are members of the human family and we have much to learn from one another.

The awards and accolades that have been given to you as a community are testimony of the selfless act of loving your neighbour as you love yourself. This is theology in action - Liberation Theology, 'God walk' instead of 'God talk'⁹ I am proud of your achievements here. I want to encourage you to be focused in getting the facts of the work that you do into the mainstream. The issues around people movement, those seeking asylum and refuge are key to current political agendas in Europe. I envisage we all will need to work together to ensure migration myths in the public domain are challenged. I would also ask you to continue to make strong alliances across Europe and share good practice; it is now not enough to just consider national boundaries alone. There are political groups across the European community who have a single agenda to ensure that borders are made even more difficult to cross.

Many reports over the years have suggested that there are myths that need to be addressed. Do we need to take time to address questions nationals across the European member states are asking? If not we leave space for others to give half truths. How can we as church help to transform the attitudes and minds of voters. Consideration needs to be given to how we educate our nationals on the reality of what we see.

8 Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr. A Gift of Love. Loc 476 Of 2830

9 Guttiérrez A theology of liberation

Some of the myths are...

- The increase in net migration is due to liberal policies and weak boarder control
- Countries in Europe support a disproportionate number of the world's refugees
- Economic migrants increase levels of unemployment and reduce the earnings of nationals
- Migration is bad for the two thirds world as it leads to brain drain
- Illegal immigration can only be prevented by tightening up on illegal immigrants in Europe
- Migration undermines community cohesion
- Economic migrants increase levels of unemployment and reduce the earnings of nationals
- Migration has resulted in segregation and parallel communities

There are mindsets that need challenge and I believe we are best placed to do so. May I further encourage you not to grow weary in doing well.

I have a little carton photo that sits on my desk, in it two people are talking to one another. One asks –‘Sometimes I would like to ask God, why there is homelessness, racism, persecution, war Why he does not do something about it.?’

The other suggests - Why don't you ask?

The considered response is, I am afraid to ask because God might ask me what I am doing about it.

Again I would like to thank you for standing in the gap!