

Kirchentag through the International Lens

Ariel Ackermann

Despite being a celebration of the German Protestant Church, Kirchentag has taken on an international character as the event extends to issues concerning Christians in a global world. This year's event had an unusually international profile due to the celebration of the Reformation, the echoes of which are still heard throughout the world. For the students in the Masters of Arts, Intercultural Theology, 17 students coming from 14 different countries (none of them Germany), attending Kirchentag in this celebratory year was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Some students of the MA ICT had the chance to participate in the Global Ecumenical Theological Institute (GETI), comprising, with other students of theology in Göttingen, the single largest group representing any one city or university. Other students who merely joined for the 5-days in Berlin packed their days with seminars, Bible studies, concerts and checking out the interesting collections of organizations represented in the Markt der Möglichkeiten. This was at times an opportunity for students to find members of their home churches connecting with German partners while also opening their eyes to the rich fabric of faith life in Germany.

As for the organization of the event itself, students were mainly impressed by the level of coordination that was needed to put on an event of this size – few could find examples of such an event in their home countries. However, Peter Nekongo, of Cameroon, did note his disappointment that the Faculties of Theology within the hosting cities were not as prominent as they could have been. His idea is that students should have the opportunity to present papers and share their studies with others. Other students expressed the desire for more programming in English since their German studies in the past 6 months have not taken them far enough to be able to participate in events conducted only in German. Yet, many did make use of the simultaneous translation technology when it was available and operating.

Commenting on the event as a whole, Ramy Hanna, of Egypt, shared his surprise to see that so many "Christian communities and Christian activities and Christian platforms...exist in Germany after 500 years of Reformation." Asked about the highlight of the event for him, he Ramy shared the following reflection:

"Kirchentag is ecumenical. You can find Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant – even Anglican – platforms there presented in different means of display...even Muslim. It's inter-religious as well. In Egypt, of course the churches are denominational, are not inter-religious; we don't have Muslim guests – it's very rare, it's not usual. But I think Kirchentag is baptized by this property and has inter-denominational and inter-religious aspects."

Indeed, the opportunity to feel welcomed to participate in Kirchentag did feel like a triumph of ecumenism for the students of Intercultural Theology. In the group of seventeen students, fourteen countries are represented and from that, Christianity and Islam as well as about twelve different Christian churches. They are already an intercultural group of people who, as Ramy Hanna puts it "curious enough to go further and explore the other side of things." In this way, Kirchentag was a standout experience of the two years that the students will spend on their MA degree from the University of Göttingen – to study in the country of Reformation, with colleagues from around the globe is itself a unique opportunity. But to do so in this historic year of 2017 and to join in the celebrations with thousands of others? That is unforgettable.

A Kirchentag experience in the context of 500th anniversary of the reformation

Seong Hee Hwang

Life, at times, is indeed anything but expectable. Could I have ever imagined myself in Berlin to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the reformation just 2 years ago? No. I was working as an office worker in South Korea, had never been to Germany let alone anywhere close to Europe, and couldn't speak a word in German. Only in recent years, have I become aware of the reformation, the name Martin Luther, and Lutherans. And there I was, together with my classmates from MA Intercultural Theology programme, taking the advantage to be at the historical celebration thanks to the opportunity given.

500 years, half the millennium, provides for diverse thoughts to occur in people's minds. Have we become better? Are we not much different? Or, did we actually make steps backwards? Any attempts to respond to or make judgment for such questions would have been unattainable by attending a few events among others that were simultaneously held during the short Kirchentag period. However, in my opinion, 'diversity and justice' was one big part of some essential themes throughout this monumental event.

The Kirchentag was impressive in several ways. First of all, it was the biggest event on a single theme in my life that I have ever visited. The magnitude of planning and preparation involved must have been immense which, of course, would have required assistance and support from many people. I was further surprised to hear that previous Kirchentag events were almost similar to this in terms of size. Secondly, the diversity of representations especially in the Market of Opportunities was surprising. Not only were there participation from Christianity of different denominations as well as other religions, there were also a great number of organizations with wide range of interests including education, publication, ecology, politics, public services, charity, gender issues, technology, and so forth. Thirdly, I was amazed to see how so many people regardless of age and gender came together at the event to commemorate the reformation.

As I see it, though, there was one thing that would have made the experience more enriching. While lectures and discussions were thankfully provided with simultaneous translation in general, other parts of the event hardly came with materials in English or staff who can explain in English. Notwithstanding that Kirchentag has been a local event in Germany, it would be evident that visitors are expected from all over the world for this special 500th anniversary of the reformation who could have benefited from such provision.

I am personally grateful to have visited one of the Korean churches in Berlin which invited comfort women during Japanese colony and families of victims of Sewol Ferry – the cruise ship that sank with unidentified reason and caused a toll of more than 300 deaths – to have their stories, pain, and wishes seen and heard. I believe they are the ones who can truly claim "You see me."

It is good to remember and celebrate the reformation, to reflect on how people challenged the status quo and stood up against perceived wrong. I sometimes sense bravery of those days much stronger than today when I hear stories about people whose influence continues to survive. More important than holding and participating in an event, however, would be maintaining the spirit to keep ourselves alert for fear of repeating the history. In that sense, the memory of 500th anniversary of the reformation in Kirchentag held in Berlin where once a wall of separation stood but torn down in aspiration for unity serves the good purpose of not only reminding us of the reformation that arose from passion for the truth but also directing us to step into the future hand in hand together with love, not on the wall of hatred.



Intercultural Theology students at the stable of the Association of Protestant Female Theologians in the Federal Republic of Germany with Dr. Cornelia Schlarb, Coordinator