

Contribution to the Report on the Conference “Edinburgh 2010” Theme 2: Christian Mission among other Faiths

“Giving Account of our Hope”

by Ulrike Schmidt-Hesse

“How should we understand ‘Christian mission among other faiths’?”. This was the question asked by the Study Group on Theme 2 in its report for the Preparation Book “Edinburgh 2010”. “As a mission to non-Christians, as a mission among other faiths, or witnessing to Christ in the context of contemporary challenges in the mutually edifying fellowship of neighbours of living faiths and ideologies?” (1)

On this subject we read, “To understand ‘Christian mission among other faiths’ means to perceive Christians as believing human beings among other believing and non-believing human beings, sharing, facing or opposing each other in specific situations in which they live their faith and draw on their respective traditions.” (2)

This understanding of mission ‘among others’ corresponds to the approach taken by the current Priority Program of the Association of Churches and Missions in South West Germany (EMS), an international fellowship of 28 churches and mission societies in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Europe, which is entitled “EMS Focus 2009-2012: Giving Account of our Hope – Christian Witness in a Pluralistic World” (3). I would like to share some of the experiences and insights we have gained in this program, which is itself a contribution to the Edinburgh 2010 process.

The focus program is based on the observation that due to the processes of globalisation and migration, all churches in the EMS Fellowship live in a pluralistic context – with people of other faiths and those without religious connections, as people and with people who differ not only in their culture, but also in their social and economic background. It aims to grapple consciously with these different contexts and to relate to the people living in them in order to witness to God’s love for the world and to give account of the hope of the kingdom of God that has come near in Jesus Christ (4). In “Common Witness”, the Mission Statement of the EMS fellowship, we read: “Mission in the first instance is God’s economy (oikonomia) for the world, in the act of creation, in the history with humankind, in Jesus Christ, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Our witness means our response and our participation in God’s compassionate and transforming love.” And later, “In our witness we meet people of other faiths and ideologies with esteem, respect, empathy, the willingness to listen, and to live together as good neighbours in bold humility”.(5)

What we can further say in response to the initial question asked and thereby to the theological relevance of other religions and other world views and what all this means for Christian witness is to be further explored in the EMS Focus Program. In the process, it is important for us to keep in mind the interdependence of religious, cultural, political and social factors. We assume that churches in the North and in the South have a great deal to learn from each other, particularly with regard to Christian mission among people of other faiths and those without religious faith. In the EMS Fellowship, as in the whole of the worldwide church, there are both churches that have always existed in the midst of other religions and those for whom this situation is relatively new. There are churches in majority and minority situations. There are experiences with different religions and life philosophies in various contexts as well as with the secular world and with the criticism of religion. Churches exist in social and political contexts that differ enormously in terms of religious freedom, respect for human rights as a whole and in their economic, social, political and cultural situation.

The main agents of witness are the churches living in a particular context. At the same time all churches, as parts of the worldwide body of Christ, are called to commit themselves to common witness by challenging, encouraging and supporting one another.

In the EMS Fellowship, joint programs like the Focus have been instituted for this purpose. Personnel exchange and the sharing of financial resources serve the same end.

The EMS Focus with its international activities (6), in particular a large intercultural Bible Reading Program, a pilgrimage in the Middle East on the theme of “Crossing Borders”, exchanges between theological training centres on the topic “Theological Training in the Presence of the Other” and support for interaction between locals and migrants by way of training in international workshops are some of the responses to one of the questions listed at the end of the report of the study group. This question reads as follows: “How may churches in the West gain new insights from the churches in the global South about witness and dialogue in a pluralistic setting? What could churches in the global South gain from discussions on pluralism in the North?” (7)

In what follows I would like to present responses to this question by way of sharing some of the experiences and insights that EMS has gained.

Christians in Ghana help Christians in the West to see that evangelism and dialogue are not contradictory. In EMS Mission Council meetings as well as in seminars and encounters they emphasize that it is essential to proclaim the Good News and to invite people to believe in Christ. They continuously challenge Christians in the West to be more outspoken, to voice their faith in the workplace, in the neighbourhood, in the public realm. At the same time they urge them to live together and share daily life in families and communities with people of other faiths and to work together for the prevention of conflicts or for non-violent conflict resolution. Thus churches in all continents are encouraged to engage in a ‘dialogue of life’ as well as a joint commitment to the common good. That all human beings are made in God’s image is given as a basis for dialogue and co-operation with people of other faiths. As a Ghanaian theologian remarked in conversation: Christian witness can be given through service (Philippians 2), essentially through Christian health care and Christian schools, not only by proclaiming the word.

Christians from Indonesia, who often live among Muslims as a small minority, share their experiences with sisters and brothers from other parts of the world: In some regions they are confronted with fundamentalist Muslim groups who threaten individual believers and, indeed, churches. A pastor shares impressive and moving stories of courageous persons witnessing to Christ in frightening situations, and she asks her sisters and brothers for support, for prayers and their advocacy of religious freedom, emphasizing that all human rights – religious and political rights as well as economic, social and cultural rights - need to be respected, for all persons, in all places. Churches in Indonesia develop programmes in which they cooperate with people of other faiths for the common good, for justice and peace, for health services and sustainable development. They emphasize that Christians and adherents of other faiths should oppose and prevent fundamentalism in all religions.

The participants of two international workshops on the role of religions in conflicts, taking place in Lebanon and in Indonesia, called upon the churches within the EMS Fellowship “to promote interfaith dialogue wherever people of different faiths live together. We learned from the experiences we shared in both workshops that dialogue in times of peace leads to a mutual trust, personal relationship and profound understanding of one another. This will not only help to sustain peaceful co-existence, but also in times of conflict, experiences of past encounters will make dialogue an effective tool to re-establish peace and achieve reconciliation”. (8) As theological basis for this approach, they cited the call to bear witness to God’s love to all people. Their call points to the need to have a clear understanding of one’s own tradition and stresses that as peacemaking is a core value of Christian teaching, it should be reflected in the content and methods of Christian education.

The Schneller Schools in Jordan and Lebanon offer – as Protestant institutions – education and vocational training to Muslim and Christian children from poor families. Their work is being highlighted and supported as the EMS Project of the Year 2010. The children

in the schools receive esteem and individual support as they learn to live together in peace. The schools and the churches sponsoring them emphasize an understanding of mission as witness through education and diakonia (Philippians 2). A pastor said: "Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary, use words." Another essential part of their witness is the commitment to peace and reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5; Luke 2). Many church leaders and members work for a just peace in the Middle East, thus cooperating with people of other faiths. It is very important for Christians in the West to realize that there is a great variety of Christian churches present in the Middle East, some of which have a tradition going back to the first centuries, and that these churches also have a long history of relations with Islam and Judaism. Accordingly, students from other countries studying at the Near East School of Theology (NEST) in Beirut, ecumenical co-workers and young volunteers serving the schools and participants in the EAPPI Programme (Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel of WCC) benefit richly by becoming acquainted with the interconnectness of religious, political, historic, cultural and economic factors. After returning to their home countries, many of them commit themselves to interreligious dialogue or to advocacy work.

At a Synod meeting, a pastor from South Africa reminds the EMS Fellowship of the fact that Christian witness in a pluralistic world must not sideline the quest for justice. He challenges the churches to leave their 'comfort zones' and walk with the poor. Referring to Luke 4 and Matthew 25, he emphasizes God's preferential option for the poor and the need for the prophetic voice of the churches. He says: Let us witness to Christ and his reign and what it means - liberation, justice and healing - hope for new life! Through the witness of another brother from South Africa, the EMS Fellowship is reminded of the co-operation between Christians and people of other faiths in the struggle against apartheid. Today, co-operation is necessary in the struggle against poverty and HIV&AIDS. Currently an ecumenical co-worker in Germany, the brother stresses that in the North, the courage to speak out for justice is needed at least as much as new capabilities in speaking of the faith.

In order to open ourselves to persons of other religions, world views and cultures, it is important to develop a sense of certainty with regard to one's own faith. In our experience, reading biblical texts in groups is quite helpful in this regard. Reading the Bible is for one itself a characteristic feature of Christian identity. Secondly, Bible reading in groups helps to discern the 'content' of this identity, provides clarity and spiritual nurturing. A form of identity is being strengthened which is not characterized by fear of the other. When groups read biblical texts by way of intercultural exchange, the participants learn that their partners really are different, that they live and believe in different ways. They are challenged to acquaint themselves with new methods of approaching biblical texts and they realize that intercultural exchange opens the richness of the Bible. My own understanding of being a Christian is further developed and strengthened. (Note: This approach needs support also vis-à-vis xenophobic positions in Western societies which consider it necessary to defend Christian civilization over and against Islam, whereas they themselves are very much estranged from Christian values and perspectives.) In the Focus-Programme „Reading the Bible through the Eyes of Another“, groups in various countries use a participatory method of Bible sharing, working together in tandems to share experiences and their insights. There are currently some 90 groups in 16 countries involved in the project, using a workbook provided by EMS to work through suggested biblical texts which speak about the witness of hope, explore ways of overcoming cultural and religious boundaries, affirm the values of hospitality and uphold respect for others. Textual and hermeneutical "fruits" of this exchange will be gathered in an international workshop in 2011 and presented in documentary form.

Among the groups involved in the program is a group in Tokyo. The members are Japanese-Filipino youth, living in irregular situations in jobs and schools. They grew up in

the Philippines and it is hard for them to find their way and to be accepted in Japanese culture. Most of them are children of single mothers. Their participation in church life is low, but they believe in Jesus Christ and they are working together under the auspices of a mission program of the Center for Japanese-Filipino Families (CJFF) called the “Best of Both Sides” (BoBS). Together, they read Exodus 15 and other texts speaking about Miriam and Moses, and they sent their findings to their partner group in Germany. In the report we read that the group members compared their experiences to that of the child Moses sailing in the roughness of the river, bumping boulders and experiencing heavy downfalls. It took these young people long years to find an elder sister in Japan, a Miriam-like figure, who helps and guides them in times of darkness and joy. “As Miriam is looking after the welfare and spiritual well-being of her younger brother, it is the same with the Best of Both Side (BoBS) Mission for the second generation migrants ... BoBS started as a singing and dancing group and we did presentations to reflect on our situation as Japanese-Filipinos. ... Only after the bible reading did we realize that BoBS performances in the future have to be songs and dances of redemption.” (9)

A pastor from Lebanon with a great deal of experience living and working with Muslims took part in an international workshop in Frankfurt/Main. At the workshop, the concept for the EMS-Focus was developed. As part of the programme there were visits and encounters in that multicultural and multireligious city, later described as a journey of faith by some of the participants. (10) In Frankfurt, we visited churches, mosques, schools, church social welfare services and the university. The international Christian group was present at evening prayer in one of the mosques. At the end the pastor said: “I have heard the call to prayer and the prayer itself many times and understand the words, of course. But here I was able to feel and appreciate the spiritual meaning and the beauty of the texts. I think that is because the call to prayer took place without the use of a loudspeaker and the group at prayer was relatively small.” This experience makes it clear, on the one hand, that the majority or minority situation plays an important part in our relationship to another religion, and that, on the other hand, an encounter in an unfamiliar context can open up new perspectives.

In Germany, many Christians live and work together with persons without religious affiliation or persons of varying world views and ideologies. “By studying enlightenment, secularism and the criticism of religion I have learned that these have opposed Christian faith”, a pastor says, “but at the same time have contributed to the development of democracy and human rights. In some respects they have even helped the churches to reflect on their history, doctrine and praxis critically and to respond to the gospel more adequately.” Christians from the West share with their sisters and brothers in other regions their experience of collaborating with secular people in their work for the common good, in social work in the community, in self-help groups, in the peace movement, in the work with migrants and refugees and in initiatives for the preservation of creation. “For me the work for an abundant life for all people and for all of creation is an expression of Christian witness”, says a young woman in an ecumenical encounter. “Secular people I work with do indeed ask me about the source of my commitment. There are many opportunities to give account of the hope that is within us. Actions often speak more strongly than words, but it is also necessary to be able to explain our actions verbally. This I learnt from Christians in the South.”

In view of the renaissance of religion in many places, even in the West, we have to discern the spirits, as not all expressions of faith, even within Christianity, are in the service of life. Reading the bible together and listening to brothers and sisters is crucial in this respect. Secular traditions may help us in our discernment, as they ask critical questions and as not all secular attitudes and forces are in contradiction to Christian faith and values. In fact, it is necessary to cooperate with all persons of good will. And sometimes we see that God is at work outside the Christian community. Secular persons and movements may be actors in

God's mission. Christian mission among people of other faiths – and no faith – may turn out to be mission with them as well as mission to them. And there are, indeed, forms of secularism which we have to challenge or even oppose as Christians.

Along this line there is another experience to be shared. When the EMS Focus was introduced in a celebratory service in Frankfurt/Main, representatives of other faith traditions participated as guests. During the reception, a Muslim representative said that dialogue should include challenging one another, pointing out each other's short-comings, failures and contradictions so that these can be corrected and the person can move towards further development.

People of other faiths may also remind us of our strengths and treasures. There are Hindus in India who remind Christians in India and in the West that there were missionaries in India who pioneered intercultural relations and interreligious dialogue. In an EMS Focus seminar, a theologian from India emphasized the wideness of God's mercy: "Salvation belongs to God, not to us", she said. "We are searching for God, as others also do, and on our journey we share our faith in Jesus Christ with them."

In the framework of the EMS Focus we shall further explore the issues raised. This includes the discussion of our differing concepts regarding the theological meaning of other faiths as well as of secularity. Other issues to be addressed are the relevance and understanding of conversion and adequate forms of evangelism. It is necessary, indeed, to develop a code of conduct. Mission to the North is a further challenge requiring special attention. Christians in the North do need their brothers and sisters in the South to support them in their witness. At the same time it is important to challenge the presupposition that the church in the North is spiritually dead. In the EMS Focus as well as in the Edinburgh 2010 process it has become clear that Christians from all contexts have something to share – in bold humility. Over and against tendencies to focus either on the maintenance of the church as an institution or on individual salvation and well-being, we must emphasize in all places that Christian witness means to share the good news of God's love for the whole world. In view of increasing plurality in our societies and within Christianity itself, in the North as well as in the South, it is crucial to continue the reflection on criteria for authentic Christian witness. In doing so, we may draw on the statement of the Conference on World Mission and Evangelism in Salvador da Bahia in 1996 (11) saying that Christ crucified and risen is the source and true measure of our faith and hope and that the gospel is life-affirming, inclusive, liberating and community-building.

We very much hope that Christians in all continents will continue journeying together to challenge, encourage and support each another in giving account of our hope, in witnessing to Christ among people of other faiths today.

Endnotes

¹⁾ Daryl Balia & Kirsteen Kim(eds), *Edinburgh 2010. Witnessing to Christ Today. Volume II* (Oxford, Regnum Books, 2010), 39

²⁾ Balia&Kim, 41

³⁾ For more information on the programme see: www.ems-online.org

⁴⁾ The Objectives of the EMS Focus 2009-2012 „Giving Account of our Hope – Christian Witness in a Pluralistic World“ with its Motto 'Journeying towards Justice – Sharing Faith – Encountering the Other – Celebrating the Fullness of Life' read: 1) The EMS Focus 2009-2012 shall invite churches and groups in the EMS fellowship to embark on faith journeys together, thus exploring how to witness to the good news of life in fullness for all in pluralistic contexts, where people of differing

faiths and worldviews, differing cultures as well as differing social and economic conditions are living together. 2) This programme shall foster experiences in inter-faith and inter-cultural co-operation which reflect the fact that our own spirituality may be enriched and renewed in encountering each other and living together. Congregations/Christians may see that distinct Christian witness and conviviality, identity and plurality are not contradictory. 3) This programme shall challenge and encourage persons to come to a better understanding of differing faith communities in their respective contexts, to realize the inter-connectedness of social, cultural and religious factors and to engage differing spiritualities resp. concepts of faith and life with each other. 4) The programme shall enable people to see that international ecumenical co-operation is essential regarding the concept and practice of Christian witness in a pluralistic society in our respective contexts. 5) Within this programme the projects of the year(s) shall foster international exchange/networking/learning from one another, as well as mutual support in times of crisis, respectively situations of conflicts between religious groups. 6) It shall provide spaces for the development and exchange of theological reflections among various contexts. 7) The programme shall promote interfaith co-operation in practical ways, particularly joint initiatives for the protection of human dignity and the development of just communities. 8) It aims at exploring and promoting concepts and practice of a spirituality of life. (From a document approved by EMS Mission Council in June 2008)

⁵⁾ From the Mission Statement of the EMS Fellowship, available at www.ems-online.org. The statement also says: "We witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ at all our respective places in an inviting and faithful way. The experience of being strangers to each other in encounters and in exchange across borders helps us to rediscover the Gospel in new ways."

⁶⁾ International Activities within the Framework of the EMS Focus : A) Reading the Bible through the Eyes of Another. Groups discover the Bible through different eyes in intercultural exchanges with partners. This is based on biblical texts which speak about the witness of hope, about paths beyond cultural and religious boundaries and about respect for others. The method used is "Bible Sharing" which ensures that all group members participate in the exchange. Working materials for adults and children are provided. B) Pilgrimage "Crossing Borders". A group of participants from the world-wide EMS Fellowship is embarking on a journey of faith. Their joint pilgrimage towards Jerusalem will lead them through four countries in the Middle East, to holy and "unholy" places in this region which is equally important to Christians, Jews and Muslims. They will meet people of different faiths who are committed to peace and justice and will support them in their joint commitment. C) Theological Training in the Presence of the Other. Those who teach theology in the presence of people from different religions can and must formulate their statements with much greater precision. Members of theological institutions in different countries of the EMS Fellowship exchange their views on how to express their relationship to other religions in the content and teaching methods of theological training. Their aim is to obtain new stimuli to use in their own programmes. D) "Appreciating Diversity – Sharing Life in Community": Church and Migration. Congregations and institutions in the international EMS Fellowship are encouraged to open up to the migrants living among them and to strengthen their rights. International trainings promote cross-cultural competence and explore new ways to live faith together as migrants and non-migrants, to co-operate in the shaping of just communities and to combat factors which force people to migrate." From the Focus-Flyer, available at www.ems-online.org

⁷⁾ Dalia & Kim, 55

⁸⁾ *Calling for Dialogue*. Prayers and Texts from the EMS-Workshops on Religions in Conflicts in Lebanon and Indonesia, Brochure, Stuttgart 2007, 37-39

⁹⁾ From an e-mail sent from the group in Japan to the partner group in Germany in July 2010.

¹⁰⁾ This concept now determines the whole of EMS Focus. We were also very much impressed to see how the motif of a common journey of faith became an essential part of the anniversary conference in Edinburgh in June 2010.

¹¹⁾ See report of Section IV of the World Conference on Mission and Evangelism in Salvador da Bahia/Brazil, in: *Zu einer Hoffnung berufen. Das Evangelium in verschiedenen Kulturen*, Elfte

Konferenz für Weltmission und Evangelisation in Salvador da Bahia, (Frankfurt/Main, Lembeck, 1999)