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**“Being church together in a
pandemic” – Reflections from
a Protestant Perspective**



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Readers' Guide

This text offers guidance from a Protestant perspective on ethical issues arising from the corona pandemic or accentuated under these conditions.

It is directed at

- Church experts on socio-ethical issues
- Churches' officers addressing social responsibility
- Decision-makers affected (or governed) by ethical considerations in churches and institutions
- Anyone interested in the questions facing Protestant churches and their attempts to find answers in response to the pandemic.

The executive summary at the start provides an overview of the content (full text starts on p. 8), with examples from practice in the member churches of the CPCE completing the picture.

The CPCE unites churches in both majority and minority situations. The topics and examples presented are intended to demonstrate how churches can face their mission of being the salt of the earth and the light of the world in their particular setting.

There are suggestions and questions to help you engage with the text or for leading discussions in committees, congregations or offices on p. 28.

The nature of the pandemic only allows for interim reflection at this point in time. It goes without saying that the Protestant churches in Europe will continue to discuss the developments and effects of the corona pandemic intensively. Now it is the moment for us to remain patient.



Executive Summary

The international and multi-dimensional character of the Covid-19 pandemic continues to challenge churches, bringing out strengths and weaknesses. Professing the grace of God in Christ, as churches we respond to those challenges praying for God's guidance in following the mission of the church in leiturgia (worship), martyria (witness), diaconia (service) and koinonia (fellowship). This paper, drafted by the Advisory Board on Ethical Issues of the CPCE mandated by the CPCE Council, is intended to be an interim reflection providing guidance for churches in their service to communities and society amidst the ongoing pandemic, thus strengthening the spirit of community and service towards all.

1. Leiturgia - Trust against Fear

1.1 The role of churches and religious groups

In response to the fear induced by the pandemic, churches are trusting in God, expressing our faith, and acting in love. We are impelled to take responsibility and to provide guidance in this situation. Our faith calls us to solidarity and to refrain from scapegoating or rash interpretations of the pandemic as God's punishment. While adhering to safety measures, churches call national and international bodies to the fulfilment of their tasks in upholding critical infrastructure.

1.2. Worship in times of Covid-19

Worship is the basis of church action. We acknowledge the significance of spiritual resources and pastoral care and publicly call societies to the importance of such resources and services. While not taking the limitations on gathering for worship services lightly, churches accept those as appropriate measures against the pandemic, and are developing new creative approaches to worshipping and forging community at home, outside or in the digital world.

1.3 Pastoral care during the pandemic

Pastoral care is one of the core tasks of Christian churches. Comforting the sick and the bereaved, and counselling medical and public personnel who have to make hard decisions has been an important part of church responses to the pandemic. Churches need to continue to do so in training professional and lay members for those tasks during the pandemic and in reminding the public of the significance of spiritual and mental sustenance alongside physical health.

2. Martyria - Freedom and Responsibility in Solidarity

2.1 Public witness in times of crisis

As churches are called to 'prayer and action for justice' (Dietrich Bonhoeffer), our public witness focuses on those most prone to suffer as a result of the pandemic, namely the poor, the elderly and those impaired on an individual or a collective level. This includes the public support of efforts directed at a just and equal distribution of the vaccine, both within Europe and beyond, because no one is safe until all are safe.

2.2 Restrictions to democracy and liberties

While the Protestant churches are committed to supporting human rights as a reflection of the dignity Christians understand to be bestowed on individual by God, we accept that the pandemic necessitates certain limitations on individual and collective liberties. This includes restrictions on the right to gather for worship. However, as churches we engage in and defend the right of democratic debate on possible alternative measures.

2.3 Education

Since the Reformation and its insistence on education and literacy, Protestant churches have appreciated the significance of education and are engaged in the field in many ways. For that reason we are concerned that prolonged lockdowns with periods of home-schooling, unequal distribution of digital equipment and skills as well as the neglect of cultural and existential topics like arts and music or religion, ethics or philosophy hurt the education and the opportunities of the most vulnerable, and have left students to deal with insecurities and anxieties on their own.

3. Diaconia - Fairness, Justice and Care

3.1 Challenges to social, ecological and economic sustainability

Diaconal service is one of the most important aspects of giving practical witness to God's grace. As Christian *diaconia* in the Covid-19 crisis extends to a number of fields, the issues may be understood in three ways: as challenges regarding the well-being of our neighbours and fellow humans, as challenges concerning our fellow creatures and creation in general, and as challenges regarding our ability to resource work sustainably, and thus aim to foster social, ecological and economic sustainability.

3.2 Health

As churches understand health care to be a fundamental individual human right, it is paramount that health care systems provide such care regardless of individual financial circumstances. Solidarity should extend also to the distribution of the vaccination. Physical and mental health requirements, however, need to be balanced. Since churches are often stakeholders in health care systems, we also need to apply those insights to our own institutions.

3.3 Ethical dilemmas: Triage and advocacy for those least advantaged

Even though situations of triage form exceptions to the rule that health care should be available to all on the basis of need, and therefore should be avoided as far as possible through adequate funding and staffing, they have been a tragic reality in the pandemic. From a Christian perspective, such prioritisation should be guided by principles of fairness, patient autonomy, human dignity and assessment of the chances of survival and clinical success. Proposals for exclusion of the older or more vulnerable on principle are therefore strongly rejected by the churches. We also need to provide pastoral care and spiritual support to those who have to make difficult triage decisions.



4. Koinonia - Living in One World

4.1 The quest for community across borders and the longing for home

Even though social distancing is needed during the pandemic, it has also highlighted the importance of community and solidarity in neighbourhoods, regions and across borders. Churches contribute to building this solidarity and community through offering people a place of belonging and organising support and aid across borders.

4.2 Women, families and domestic violence

However, in the crisis not every apartment, not every dwelling proved to be a home. Especially for women and children, strains have been enormous and domestic violence has skyrocketed. In their advocacy for the most vulnerable, the churches are alert to the specific challenges of domestic situations and also provide support.

4.3 European unification and solidarity in times of Covid-19

While the beginning of the crisis prompted national insularity, the need for and value of international cooperation was eventually recognised in Europe. Especially in questions of social justice and a solidarity reaching out beyond the European Union, the spirit and witness of

koinonia across borders will be brought to the fore by the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe.





Foreword

Protestant churches in Europe have responded to the Covid-19 crisis through providing spiritual care, medical aid, practical support and moral orientation. As the pandemic continues, it is timely to explore the common ground between the Protestant churches in Europe in responding to the crisis.

The nature of the challenge presented by the pandemic may be characterised by three traits.

1. First of all, the challenge is international. The virus travels across mountains and oceans, let alone national borders. As an international challenge, it calls for international efforts.
2. Secondly, it points to the interaction between politics, economy, social security, public health and spiritual well-being, and is closely connected to questions of sustainability.
3. Finally, this pandemic has presents challenges to some of the church's core practices, including its emphasis on regular, corporeal community as the "gathering of

believers",¹ the administration of sacraments, and its diaconal service to the sick and needy. In that, it brings out the strengths and points to the weaknesses of our churches, challenging us to learn and grow, trusting to the Holy Spirit that sustains us.

This orientation paper was drafted by the Advisory Board on Ethics of the CPCE, as mandated by the Council in order to provide member churches with an informed perspective on the current situation. It reflects upon the issues affecting the Protestant churches in Europe that the Advisory Board deemed most urgent. The board members

¹ Cf. Augsburg Confession, Art. VII: "We also teach that one holy Christian church must exist and remain at all times, and that this church is the gathering of all believers, among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered in accordance with the gospel."



are aware of the fact that the Covid-19 pandemic is not over, that churches act in very different contexts, and that we may still be challenged by many future phenomena unforeseeable at the moment. While aware of the risks of an assessment in the midst of the crisis, it seemed timely to offer these reflections at a moment when Protestant churches in Europe are called upon to take decisions on many of the issues explored in this paper.

Professing the grace of God in Christ, as churches we respond to those challenges praying for God's guidance in following the mission of the church. We trust in the Spirit to help us be the church we are meant to be.

In describing that mission, the four aspects of *leiturgia*, *martyria*, *diaconia* and *koinonia* originating in apostolate theology have been a helpful framework for the CPCE in the past.² Based on that experience, they are utilised in this document to sketch the mission of the Protestant churches in Europe in responding to the challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Koinonia, the community of Christians across borders, points to a response to the global nature of the pandemic

threat that we face. *Diaconia* describes the mission of the church to contribute to fairness, justice and care, especially for marginalised members of society. *Martyria* directs us to the public witness of the church, extending to questions of religious freedom, but also spiritual and physical well-being and universal solidarity. *Leiturgia* signifies the worship of God in Christ as the starting-point for facing the challenges posed by the pandemic and teaches us trust instead of fear and timidity: "For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and consideration" (2 Tim 1:7).

² Cf. Mario Fischer / Martin Friedrich (Eds.): Church Communion. Principles and Perspectives (Leuenberg Documents 16), Leipzig 2019, 116.

1. Leiturgia – Trust against Fear

1.1 The role of churches and religious groups

The message of the Gospel expressed in the words of 2 Timothy 1:7 proclaims trust instead of fear. However, at this time fear is spreading, as the loss of control, the upheaval of everyday life and the rising numbers of people suffering and dying reveal the limits of human capabilities.

Assuming responsibility instead of scapegoating

Unified in prayer as Protestant churches in Europe, we bring our frailty, our dependence, our sinfulness and need for justification before the Lord, faithfully asking that the Lord may grace us with the power to respond to this challenge in the spirit of Christ with the proclamation of this message, with expressions of faith and acts of love, and that the Lord God will provide where we find ourselves helpless.

Thus, we abstain from a rash interpretation of the pandemic as God's punishment, from blaming others and from dispensing judgement to alleged culprits. Rather, we take the pandemic as a call for reflection and repentance, as we unite in prayer for forgiveness and assume the responsibility of stewardship for God's creation.

Acknowledging the limits of our control, we don't give in to despair, but instead trust in the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to endow us with power, love and consideration.

The power of the Spirit is revealed in the inner strength that does not lose hope, but gives comfort and encouragement to others. It makes clear that the church is relevant to human life, individual existence and social bonding in many regards. It cautions us, however, from overstretching the scope of our competencies. The churches are not the wardens of critical technical and systemic infrastructure, but leave such tasks to those equipped and mandated for this by their citizens, namely nation states and international institutions such as the EU. We critically call upon those bodies to fulfil these crucial tasks.³

The power of the Spirit thus does not endorse carelessness or recklessness. We recognise the dangers presented by the virus and the necessity of social distancing and protective measures, even as they disrupt the life and witness of the church. We are aware of the difficulty of certain decisions that need to be taken in the context of the pandemic. But even in dramatic situations of triage (cf. 3.3), when the suffering of our neighbours can only be reduced and not avoided and decisions need to be made that entangle us in guilt, the Holy Spirit empowers us to take responsibility, accept the load and trust in the mercy of God.

Orientation towards solidarity

The power of the Spirit shows itself also in the love that we give to our neighbours, no matter whether they are, near or far. For we know that one who regards the need of another becomes his or her neighbour (Luke 10:36-37). For that reason, the love inspired by the Holy Spirit crosses borders and transcends limitations. It enables us to strive for active solidarity that goes beyond family, region, ethnicity, religion or nation, as expressed in the motto of the Covax initiative to provide vaccines to everybody: "No one is safe until everyone is safe."⁴

The power of the Spirit finally teaches us consideration. Not giving in to fear, but relying on the trust of God means avoiding overreaction and panic, but keeping calm and proceeding with consideration of the consequences of our actions for our neighbours.

Church-run hospitals on the German side of the border with France kindly accepted patients from Alsace in spring 2020 when the neighbouring health system reached its limit.

3 Cf. Wolfgang Huber, Systemrelevanz und Resonanzkrise, (Zeitzeichen online,

<https://zeitzeichen.net/node/8594> (last accessed October 21st, 2020).

4 Cf. <https://www.who.int/initiatives/act-accelerator/covax>.

1.2. Worship in times of Covid-19

The Protestant understanding of services of worship is to bring people together as a fellowship of one Body in one Spirit (*koinonia*) for preaching the Gospel of Christ, sharing His sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion, and worshipping God in prayers and hymns (*leiturgia*).⁵ Such practices of the church have been hindered by the pandemic. Some societies have experienced full lockdown, including church buildings being closed and a ban on public services of worship. Others have had to limit participation. In many places, lockdown has closed down not only activities in church buildings but many of the regular operations characteristic of open societies. It has been understood as an emergency solution at best, discussed and applied together by political and religious leaders in order to preserve life and healthcare for everyone (cf. 2.2).

Church buildings and services of worship

Protestant churches regard their church buildings primarily as assembly rooms. When gatherings in confined space were banned or restricted, many churches transferred their services of worship and activities to the open air – often in public spaces. Churches developed and adopted measures to reduce the risk of contamination during services, for example limiting attendance numbers and observing rules of physical distancing, wearing masks and refraining from singing. These measures were and are constantly adjusted in response to changing scientific understandings and legal frameworks. Since church buildings range in size from chapels to cathedrals, the relevant measures have to be customised accordingly. While some churches have been creative in finding new places and spaces for group worship, Protestant churches have also opened their church buildings to provide opportunities for private meditation.

New creative approaches to worshipping

There is a growing need for a creative approach to designing worship experiences for the people in our churches and societies looking for spiritual fellowship in times of crisis and lockdown. Some congregations distribute worship sheets so that people can celebrate worship at home. The means of distribution are manifold and creative. Small groups and micro-gatherings for praise and prayer may empower people of faith despite the times of pandemic. The main change in worshipping practice in times of Covid-19 is the shift to digital formats. Online services are celebrated in all European languages and enable people to attend church wherever they are. Digital capabilities may instil the presence of Christ and virtual fellowship



⁵ Leuenberg Agreement 1973, § 2.

behind any closed doors and do so more vividly than ever before. A major difference can be observed between simple emitter-receiver formats and the technical solutions that facilitate mutual communication between members of church congregations, with online services in the first case lacking essential communicative dimensions.

The Evangelical Churches of the Augsburg Confession in both Poland and Romania experienced much greater numbers of people attending online services of worship from certain smaller city congregations than the usual personal attendance in these places. The parish pastors received much positive feedback from former parish members who had emigrated.

Celebrating the Lord's Supper online

One major subject of debate is about the celebration of the Lord's Supper online, which raises questions about understandings of communion and bodily presence. All churches agree that this cannot become regular common practice. The CPCE has launched a survey among the member churches on "The practice and theology of the Lord's Supper" to examine this issue.

Virtual closeness and bodily presence

However, bodily presence remains a vital element of Christian community, and is essential in the case of some liturgical acts, such as baptisms or weddings. Where services of worship are still permissible despite the epidemiological crisis, it should be natural to use the opportunity to come together for worship with all possible measures protecting both lay and ordained participants against infection. Virtual channels of communication may create

opportunities for hybrid worship experiences (including church ceremonies), especially for the most vulnerable residing in homes, hospitals and hospices.

We know that worship constitutes the basis of church action, as we acknowledge the significance of spiritual resources and pastoral care. But when personal gatherings in worship and song are prone to endanger the health and life of our neighbours, we trust in the Spirit to provide sustenance of our faith through other channels. In this, we gratefully turn to the experience of churches long accustomed to bridging physical distances due to diaspora situations.

1.3 Pastoral care during the pandemic

Pastoral care in times of a health crisis

The pastoral care of people in special circumstances is one of the indispensable core tasks of Christian churches. The focus has always been on individuals in distress, for example the weak, the sick, the dying and their relatives. This is related to the fundamental orientation of Christian ethics, which always focuses on persons who, because of their vulnerability, are in particular need of support from others. "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." (Mt 25:35f)

Particularly in times of crisis, such accompaniment is of utmost importance. Pastors should therefore always have the opportunity to visit people in distress.⁶ In the current

⁶ In the text "Ob man vor dem Sterben fliehen möge" (should we flee death) (1527; WA 23; 338-379), M. Luther pointed to the dialectic of wise



pandemic, wearing face masks and protective clothing significantly reduces the risk of infection. Therefore, pastors should be allowed access to the sick and dying, and churches should engage in constructive dialogue with the respective governments and healthcare providers to advocate for the possibility of pastoral visits, even under the most difficult conditions, and priority vaccination together with medical and care staff.

Presence of relatives in case of illness, at the hour of death and at funerals

During the pandemic, it has not always been possible for relatives to visit sick or elderly family members. The experience of not being able to be close to relatives in the hour of death is particularly painful. It is understandable that when hospitals are overloaded, the presence of relatives creates additional problems (e.g. an additional risk of importing or spreading the virus). Nevertheless, concern for the safety of all involved must not cause existential human needs to fall by the wayside. For this reason, the CPCE member churches advocate that at least one or two close relatives be allowed access to care homes and sickrooms.

Just as it is the justified desire of the dying not to be left alone, it is also the relatives' right to say goodbye to the dying with dignity. The burial of relatives is a deeply human need. While there may be extreme exceptional situations where visiting by relatives is not possible, every effort should be made to ensure that the bereaved can witness a ritual whose memory may comfort them in their later remembrance of the deceased.

caution and courageous faith in times of plague and remarked on pastoral accompaniment: "If one behaves in such a way in a city that one is bold in faith where the need of one's neighbours requires it, and conversely cautious where it is not necessary, and everyone helps to ward off the poison with what one can, then there is certainly little dying in such a city." Martin Luther, *Ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. Karin Bornkamm and Gerhard Ebeling, vol. 2: *Erneuerung von Frömmigkeit und Theologie*, Frankfurt am Main, Insel Verlag, 2nd edition 1983, 225-250, p. 242.

Dealing with risk, shortcoming and guilt

Besides corona patients, other people also need support from the churches during these times. Often there are feelings of guilt; relatives grieve or lament because they could not be with their family members. Geriatric nurses and hospital staff reach the limits of their strength. Decision-makers bear the burden of making decisions and sometimes see in retrospect that there could have been better options. People suffer under isolation, causing psychological problems or sheer fear. In the name of the "Spirit of power, love and consideration" (2 Tim 1:7), churches may emphasise here especially that trust in God includes the courage to make decisions, and that every life situation with all its limits, doubts and risks may be placed in the hands of God, who offers forgiveness to those who humbly seek it.

Training pastors and chaplains

Pastoral care in times of crisis is particularly demanding for pastors and pastoral workers. In the CPCE member churches, church workers should be supported and trained for and through such situations. This relates first of all to practical questions concerning sanitary protection measures, the organisation of church services, or conducting personal visits. But above all, it is about guidance on how to accompany those affected. How can the Gospel address the fear and distress that have come over us as a result of the health crisis? Sharing our different experiences with these issues in the member churches is particularly important and helpful.

The Church of Denmark identified already in spring 2020 ten ministers to be trained as chaplains for corona intensive care units in cooperation with hospitals and disease control centres.



2. Martyria – Freedom and Responsibility in Solidarity

2.1 Public witness in times of crisis

Spirituality as the starting point for public witness

The pandemic has numerous implications for the public life and witness of the Church, including severe restrictions on church services, diaconal programmes and church life in general. Under these conditions, how can the Church still fulfil its office as a public witness to Christ and his Gospel? In times of crisis, we are called to “prayer and doing justice among human beings”, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us.⁷ Public witness thus has its starting point in spirituality. As such, this unprecedented crisis offers the chance for a renewed focus on prayer, meditation and scriptural reflection. In prayer and intercession, we give and experience solidarity as we join with our sisters and brothers across denominational and national borders. Being one in Christ, we bring their requests and laments

as well as our own before God, while we also join together in worship and giving thanks (Romans 12:15). From this inner focus arises the ministry to the world. Giving public witness of the Gospel of God’s grace in Christ thus involves the interpretation and formation of our lives according to the truth of the Gospel, as God’s grace liberates us from fear and sin for a free, grateful service to his creatures (Barmen Declaration, Art. 2).⁸

Public witness in responsibility

Being liberated from fear and sin, we are liberated for God and for other people. Both aspects of freedom come together in responsibility and “doing justice among human beings” as part of the Church’s public testimony. Responsibility includes vicarious representative action. Since Jesus Christ instructed his disciples to seek him in his least brothers and sisters, the sick, poor and needy (Mt 25:34-46), we are directed to the perspective of those most prone to suffering from the pandemic. Over the last year, churches have come up with numerous creative ways of supporting those in need, including by means of

7 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English 8, edited by John de Gruchy, Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2010, 389.

8 Cf. <https://www.ekd.de/en/The-Barmen-Declaration-303.htm>

concrete practical assistance. In addition to this, churches also vicariously lend their voices to the unheard. Voicing concern and directing public attention to those hit hardest by the immediate, medium- and long-term consequences of the Covid-19 crisis becomes an important task. This includes our sisters and brothers close by, but also those in countries struggling with severe hunger and poverty as direct results of the pandemic. Our call to speak out for those who cannot speak for themselves also includes efforts for a just and equal distribution of the vaccine, both within Europe and beyond.⁹ For the Church, responsibility furthermore means concern for the public good as it partakes in civil society and contributes in different ways to public opinion. As a witness for truth and justice, the Church counters anxiety and suspicion and the spread of conspiracy theories or scapegoating. Against hermeneutics of fear that view ‘the other’ primarily as a potential threat, the Church emphasises our joint need for grace and deliverance, while we are all equally bound up in God’s ceaseless love. “There is no fear in love” (1 John 4:18).

As the effects of the pandemic on the weakest members of society became evident, the CPCE launched its first ever joint appeal for donations, focusing on two causes – both for the people struggling to hold on in the conflict zone of Aleppo and for the refugees stranded in dreadfully cramped conditions on Lesbos. The CPCE’s 2020 Easter Appeal raised more than EUR 100,000 in total.

2.2 Restrictions to democracy and liberties

Protestant commitment to human rights

Protestant churches become alert when human rights and liberties are in danger. Historically, Protestant theology has contributed significantly to the emergence of the concept of human rights alongside the struggle for freedom of thought, conscience and religion, drawing on the biblical view of the direct position of humans before God. That is why Protestant churches in Europe are committed to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights¹⁰ and recognise the European Convention on Human Rights.

9 See the joint Protestant-Catholic declaration in Germany (<https://www.ekd.de/impfstoffe-muessen-auch-den-aermsten-zur-verfuegung- stehen-62812.htm>).

10 Presidium of the CPCE: The protection of human rights is a common task for the churches (2008), in: Michael Bünker / Frank-Dieter

“According to the Protestant understanding, human rights are such rights as accrue to all human beings on the basis of their God-given dignity. Just as they cannot be bestowed by any inner-worldly authority, so they cannot be denied by any authority; they are unassailable, inalienable and indivisible. They form basic rights of the individual person with binding force on for state action.”¹¹

Reacting to limitations to individual liberties during the pandemic

The churches were and are convinced of the need to take rapid action against the pandemic, and that some restrictions on civil liberties have to be accepted. At the same time, they have emphasised the value of human rights. Several churches explicitly criticised e.g. the restrictions on travel and movement imposed by border closures as part of the pandemic response, arguing that this disproportionately affected cross-border commuters and couples and families living across borders.¹² These churches expressed concern that regional communities and meeting spaces were torn apart, and borders were once again perceived as dividing lines.

On 29 April 2020, the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Poland sent an open letter to the Prime Minister of the Republic of Poland. With this letter, the church supported cross-border workers and joined the call for lifting the 14-day quarantine obligation preventing cross-border workers from returning to their places of employment and causing problems with supporting their families. A day later, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki announced that those simply working or studying abroad – cross-border workers, students and pupils – would be able to return to work and study from 4 May without having to undergo the obligatory 14-day quarantine.

Fischbach / Dieter Heidtmann (Ed.): Protestant in Europe. Social-ethical contributions (Leuenberg Documents 15), Leipzig 2013, p. 392.

11 Presidium of the CPCE: Human Rights and Morality (2009), in: Michael Bünker / Frank-Dieter Fischbach / Dieter Heidtmann (Ed.): Protestant in Europe. Social-ethical contributions (Leuenberg Documents 15), Leipzig 2013, 390.

12 See the Declaration of the Protestant Churches in Alsace-Lorraine, Baden and the Palatinate dated 22 April 2020 (https://www.ekiba.de/html/aktuell/aktuell_u.html?&m=31&artikel=24286&cataktuell=331), and by Bishop Jerzy Samiec of the Protestant Church A.C. in the Republic of Poland dated 29 April 2020 (https://en.luteranie.pl/nawosci/situation_of_cross_border_workers.html).

Freedom of religion or belief and the right to worship

With regard to freedom of religion or belief, one crucial question was whether to restrain, restrict or even prohibit common worship or special services. The European Convention on Human Rights declares that the right to freedom of religion may be exercised “either alone or in community with others, in public or private, to manifest one’s religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance”.

At the same time, however, the Convention on Human Rights also provides for this liberty to be restricted, inter alia, for the protection of health.¹³ The right to the joint practice of religion was restricted in the context of the bans on public gatherings. The churches do not regard this as religious discrimination, but recognise it as a justified balancing act to protect the most vulnerable members of society. However, they question whether state restrictions on participants in religious services were really proportionate in all cases and if the assessment of religious events as the cause of the spread of the pandemic presented by state authorities and the media was always justified in relation to the assessment of other cultural or sporting events.

Respecting democratic principles

The churches do not call for civil disobedience against government measures to combat the pandemic. They do, however, call for a democratic discussion on appropriate alternative measures, and they object to the false binary logic whereby questioning freedom-restricting measures and calling for discourse on alternatives are discredited as demonstrating a lack of solidarity. A debate on alternative measures to combat the pandemic, with the participation of the churches and scientific theology or ethics, is also relevant for the sake of strengthening the general trust in the rule of law and a culture of transparent decision-making in individual countries.

It is one of the achievements of the rule of law that citizens can appeal to courts to scrutinise the legality of questionable measures. “To do so is not a sign of a lack of solidarity, but of the exercise of another fundamental right – that of legal protection.”¹⁴ If freedoms have been unjustly or unreasonably restricted, there is an opportunity for compensation or rectification in the legislative processes. The balancing of health as one aspect of the right to live against other human rights and freedoms shall remain a fundamental task in this regard.

13 See the European Convention on Human Rights, Art. 9.

14 CEC Thematic Group on Human Rights: Reflections on Freedom of Religion or Belief during the Fight against the COVID-19 Pandemic, para. 12 (<https://www.ceceurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/CEC-document-on-COVID-19-English-1.pdf>).

2.3 Education

Education addresses the whole human being

The impact of the measures to combat the pandemic clearly showed that schools, kindergartens and day-care centres are more than mere institutions for imparting knowledge. They serve education in a holistic sense, which also encompasses the socialisation and personal development of infants, children and adolescents, and they represent protected spaces where young people can meet peers, try things out, practise democratic processes and where their interest in the unknown is awakened.

Churches and church welfare agencies in many countries provided computers for children in disadvantaged families to enable them to participate in home-schooling.

Educational justice

State schools are supposed to make education accessible to all children and young people and to reduce inequalities in access to education. However, by suspending face-to-face teaching, as a key measure in the fight against the pandemic, and imposing remote education via the internet instead, inequalities became all the more apparent. They concern both infrastructure differences between urban and rural areas and between rich and poor, and also different home learning environments.

The differences in the home learning environment that are coming to light are worrying. If the technical provision of computers and the internet is not available and there is no quiet learning or working place, fundamental prerequisites for successful home schooling are lacking. This is also true where parents or carers are not able to support children in their learning, for whatever reason. The educational differences between families reinforce the injustice of opportunities for children, an effect that is intensified by the suspension of regular schooling.

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Portugal responded to the drop-out of school meals due to school closures by handing out food parcels to disadvantaged families and increasing the number of meals served in its social kitchen.

For students from precarious backgrounds, schools also often offer elementary basic services – sanitary facilities, heated rooms, regular meals, as well as care and protection against domestic violence and situations of risk. When face-to-face teaching is discontinued, these needs can be neglected.

The added value of the educational work of the churches

The Protestant churches have been involved in educational work since their beginnings and are committed to educational justice and equal opportunities. To this end, we see the importance of ensuring that the technical equipment of schools and students meets the requirements of digital

teaching and that well-qualified teachers are available in sufficient numbers. Care must also be taken to ensure that cultural and existential topics, such as those addressed in art, music or religion classes as well as in ethics or philosophy, do not fall victim to distance learning. Especially in times of crisis, religious education offers the opportunity to address experiences of insecurity and fear with young people in a protected setting and to open up constructive ways of coping with them. The educational work of the churches must therefore devote itself especially to the neglected questions of personal development and the promotion of peaceful and social coexistence, and bring existential questions for children and young people into the discussion.



3. Diaconia – Fairness, Justice and Care



3.1 Challenges to social, ecological and economic sustainability

The diaconal service provided by churches, Christian institutions and Christians in their individual lives is one of the most important aspects of giving practical witness to God's grace during the Covid-19 pandemic. "In being directed not only to members of the church but to all people in need, the diaconate of Christians corresponds to the universality of salvation."¹⁵ Solidarity is thus not only tantamount among Christians, but expressed across society.

As Christian *diaconia* in the Covid-19 crisis extends to a number of fields, the challenges may be understood in three ways –

- Social sustainability: the well-being of our neighbours and fellow humans
- Ecological sustainability: concerning our fellow creatures and creation in general
- Economic sustainability: our ability to provide resource work sustainably.

Social sustainability

Even though the coronavirus affects people regardless of class, religion, gender or origin, its consequences tend to hit the economically and socially vulnerable hardest. The poor cannot afford costly private medical care, they often have jobs it is not possible to carry out from home, and they don't tend to have spacious housing where quarantine is easier to bear. Many of the lowest-paid workers were laid off altogether, and thus faced major financial challenges alongside grave health risks and a considerably higher mortality rate than the better off.¹⁶ And what is true within nations is even more relevant on an international level: the more affluent a given economy and the better its welfare system, the more help it can provide to the needy – and vice versa.

Cherishing Jesus' words that he may be found in the poorest and least of his brothers and sisters (Matthew 25:40), Christian churches have a particular concern for those in

¹⁵ The Church of Jesus Christ, 1994, section I.3.3.3.

¹⁶ Cf. Juan C. Palomino, Juan G. Rodríguez, Raquel Sebastian, Wage inequality and poverty effects of lockdown and social distancing in Europe, European Economic Review 129/2020, Article 103564.

need, regardless of religion, nationality, ethnicity, age or gender. For that reason, they give public witness in word and deed for national and international solidarity and action to support the needy.

Ecological Sustainability

In its genesis and consequences, the Covid-19 pandemic is connected to ecological and environmental issues. The development and spread of the virus through zoonosis is partly due to the excessive exploitation of wildlife habitats and the restriction of biodiversity and ecosystems by humans. The dire economic consequences threaten to push the challenges posed by ecological deterioration aside. On the other hand, the Covid-19 pandemic is a foreshadowing of the challenges we have to meet as climate change accelerates – and the countermeasures taken are a strong sign of hope for what humans can achieve.¹⁷ As Christians are called not only to serve their neighbours, but also to stewardship for creation and their fellow creatures, churches will continue to highlight ecological challenges in the aftermath of the pandemic and act accordingly.

Economic sustainability

Diaconia in itself demands sustainability – not only being able to help today, but also tomorrow and the day after that. For that reason, caring for the elderly and stricken requires careful balancing of the needs and risks among those concerned – the needs for physical and spiritual health against the risks for helpers and the helped. The Good Samaritan did not work himself to death in his help for the robbed and beaten victim (Luke 10:25-37). For this reason, practical service in looking to the needs of the most vulnerable also has to take into account the situation of helpers. In many societies, those caring for the needy and providing basic personal or menial services and incurring the greatest health risks earn the lowest incomes, thus compounding health risks with financial ones. Depending on the size, status and means of the respective churches, acts of *diaconia* may be widespread and varied – from personal calls to the stricken and needy to maintaining health services or giving a public voice to those suffering in neglect. What is true for individuals may also concern the church organisation, as extending diaconal services beyond church members may be an issue especially for smaller minority churches with limited funds. Hence churches will speak out for welfare arrangements that

provide for a just balancing of the caring load between the well-off and those less fortunate.

The Joint Public Issues Team of several Protestant churches in the UK launched a number of projects addressing the social, ecological and economic challenges that were highlighted or caused by the pandemic. Examples include: “Stay Alert to Justice” raising justice issues and providing support to those who need it most; “From Recovery to Flourishing”, a vision for re-engineering the economy to deliver a just and sustainable future; and “Covid-19 and Your Community”, suggesting five topics to pinpoint the mission of local churches within local communities.

3.2 Health

Health care as an individual right and a common task

For the constitutions of democratic states and international charters of rights, the protection of health, according to the principles of universality and equality, is a fundamental right of the individual and a task for the community. The individual right to health care and autonomy must correspond with the principle of solidarity, recognising the interdependence between human beings. During the pandemic, solidarity signifies individual responsibility in adopting the proper behaviour to help prevent contagion, not only for oneself, but also for others. Therefore, even those at lower risk have a duty to protect themselves from infection, in the interests of the most vulnerable.

The question of appropriateness of measures to maintain the healthcare system

In order to contain the number of infected people and avoid overwhelming healthcare systems, many national states introduced lockdown measures that required populations to reduce movement and maintain physical distancing. (cf. 3.3) These lockdown measures have certainly been effective in reducing the number of infections, and they have been justified in relieving the pressure on hospitals and safeguarding the most vulnerable sections of the population (mainly the elderly and the sick), keeping most widely alive the feeling of social solidarity and the intergenerational pact. At the same time, health consists of more than simply physical survival. Physical and mental health have to be balanced, especially in situations restricting human contact. From the Christian perspective,

¹⁷ Cf. Torsten Meireis, *Bebauen und bewahren? Christliche Wirtschaftsethik und Green Economy in der Corona-Krise*, evangelische aspekte, 30. Jahrgang, Heft 3, August 2020, <https://www.evangelische-aspekte.de/christliche-wirtschaftsethik-green-economy/> (last accessed Feb. 12th, 2021).

every human being has dignity and agency. If it will not cause harm to others, people should have the freedom and responsibility to choose the risks they take with their lives. It would be authoritarian to declare that preservation of biological life and physical health should be elevated above other goods in society.¹⁸

Solidarity and vaccination

The principle of solidarity should also apply to vaccination policies. As vaccines are not immediately available in large quantities, it is necessary to establish priorities for access to them, keeping in mind previous decisions and trying to safeguard a perspective of universalistic distributive justice. The European Union played an important role

terms of economic sustainability (cf. 3.1), ethical dilemmas (cf. 3.3), or dealing with guilt after tragic decisions (cf. 1.3). Although social and health policies are shaped according to national considerations, the churches must not only help the individual, but also keep in mind the social tasks of society. Care for the neighbour remains a characteristic of every Christian congregation, and voluntary work and engagement has always been and will continue to be constitutive for the church. Both congregations and churches as supporting agencies of social-diaconal institutions will need further professional, health and economic support, both nationally and internationally, during and after the period of the pandemic, in order to continue their valuable work in a motivated but secure manner.



in purchasing and approving vaccine for all member countries. European solidarity, however, should not be limited to its member states, but bear in mind the more vulnerable societies in other parts of the world. (cf. 1.1 & 2.1)

Churches as stakeholders in healthcare systems

In many Protestant churches in Europe, regional churches or even church congregations run diaconal, social and healthcare institutions. In this regard, they share the same challenges as other operators of healthcare facilities in

¹⁸ Cf. Ulrich H.J. Körtner, Ethik in Zeiten von Corona. Eine diakonisch-ethische Perspektive. In: Wolfgang Kröll et al. [Eds.]: Die Corona-Pandemie. Baden-Baden 2020.

3.3 Ethical dilemmas: Triage and advocacy for those least advantaged

The limits of healthcare systems

Healthcare systems around the world are under considerable strain during the pandemic and are in some cases reaching their limits. First and foremost, it is important to understand that in healthcare, triage situations¹⁹ are not the rule, but rather the exception that needs to be avoided as far as possible by adequate funding and staffing and maintaining the broad accessibility of public health systems. Correspondingly, in countries with such health sys-

tems the need for triaging was less urgent. However, even apart from war situations there are always extraordinary circumstances such as natural catastrophes or mass accidents in which even the best-equipped health system cannot avoid triage. This has also been the case during the Covid-19-pandemic, where capacity for intensive care patients requiring respiratory support may be limited, mainly because numbers of the necessary specialist staff cannot be increased at will. Situations in which triage decisions present difficult ethical dilemmas therefore arise.²⁰

Prioritisation and triage

Triage in intensive therapy has been, in recent months, a tragic reality in many countries throughout the world. Situations have been created where the imbalance between available resources and care demands has made it necessary to abandon the traditional principle of “first come, first served” for access to intensive care. In this regard, the churches express solidarity and strong support for doctors



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and healthcare or social workers who are closely involved in the fight against the epidemic. Such support may involve increased staffing as well as pastoral counselling.

Professional societies and national ethics committees have developed guidelines for triage decisions in the context of the corona pandemic. However, processes of prioritisation and triage are examples for the allocation of scarce resources to potential users that are generally required in healthcare today. Questions concerning the allocation of medical aid and resources are thus not just related to the

¹⁹ Triage is a term coined in military medicine to determine which patients would receive the benefits of limited medical resources and has since spread to cases of disaster and mass emergency, where the sheer number of injured does not allow for the treatment of all. In day-to-day practice the term is used to signify a process of assigning medical aid according to the severity of a patient's condition and their likelihood of recovery with or without treatment. In most cases, it is a way of prioritising medical services and using available resources to their best advantage. It is a process of prioritisation that is common to the day-to-day routine of hospitals and emergency rooms. Only in very severe emergency situations does it involve determining which patients will or will not receive medical treatment at all.

²⁰ Cf. Ulrich H.J. Körtner, Die ethischen Dilemmata der Triage, <https://science.orf.at/stories/3202857/>, 13.11.2020 (most recently accessed 9.12.2020).

corona pandemic. To discuss these questions in a transparent manner is an important democratic task, which requires the active participation of the church as well as Christian social welfare organisations.

Alternatives to avoid triage situations

Considered from the perspective of medical ethics, decisions of allocation should be made as far away from the individual patient as possible. This also applies to any supply situation in the Covid-19 pandemic. First of all, as far as possible situations where resources are insufficient to meet needs must be avoided by appropriate reallocation measures, for example by transferring patients who do not require intensive care to an intermediate care unit or to a general ward.²¹ However, the postponement of elective operations in order to relieve the burden on hospitals and create additional capacity for Covid-19 wards is also a covert form of triage.

Churches hope that the situation that has occurred will not be repeated in the future. In this regard, they call for social policies to be put in place that allow the fundamental principles of human dignity and social solidarity to be respected – in particular, that health and hospital services be strengthened and that coordinated plans against other future pandemics be drawn up at national and supranational level in accordance with WHO guidelines. For future situations and threats, it is a mandatory political task to keep triage the exception through adequate funding and staffing and maintaining the accessibility of health services to all citizens.

Principles for prioritisation

The basic principles for prioritisation decisions are (1) justice (fairness), (2) patient autonomy – that is, as far as the

patient's will is known – and (3) human dignity. A further criterion is (4) the chances of survival and clinical success.

In this case, during the pandemic, there has been much discussion about the advisability of setting an age limit for access to intensive care (i.e. if a person is older than x years, he or she cannot have access to intensive therapy). The churches radically reject the idea that part of the older and more vulnerable population can be excluded in principle from access to care. This would be at odds with any principle of human dignity and social solidarity. However, the churches are aware that tragic choices have been made. On the contrary, we know – and accept – that age is a parameter that is taken into consideration in view of the correlation with the current and prognostic clinical evaluation (but it is not the only parameter, nor even the main one). The priority should be established by evaluating, on the basis of many clinical indicators, the patients for whom the treatment can be reasonably expected to be more effective, in the sense of ensuring the greatest chance of survival. Finally, the churches reject the idea that the choice between whom to treat and whom not can be entrusted to a judgement on a patient's (presumed) future quality of life.

In Italy, the Waldensian Church installed intercoms with transparent room dividers in various care homes and hospitals so that residents and patients could see and speak with their relatives. However, as the family members missed physical contact with their loved ones, they also designed "hugging rooms", where they could touch, embrace and stroke one another through a polythene sheet with built-in gauntlets.

21 Triage also includes regularly reviewing whether or not an intensive care treatment program that has already been initiated should be continued. Again, only the prospects of clinical success and the patient's willingness to undergo treatment may be the pivotal factors in this decision. In an emergency, this could mean transferring a patient who is already receiving intensive care to another ward, which would free up a ventilator for another patient.

Diaconia in the context of triage means advocacy for those who are especially vulnerable and for those least advantaged. Due to the principle of equality, prioritisation only within the group of Covid 19 patients is not justifiable.

On the other hand, intensive care beds are also needed for other patients, for example accident victims, heart attack and stroke patients, or patients who have just undergone surgery after a serious medical intervention. This means, however, that in the event of a catastrophe, patients not suffering from Covid-19 might still be affected by triage.

Intensive care and palliative care

It should also be noted that there are not only problems of shortage, but also of unnecessary or inappropriate health-care due to over- or misuse of resources to the detriment of the patients concerned. For example, whether Covid-19 patients in nursing homes should be transferred to an intensive care unit or whether it would be more beneficial for them to continue to receive medical care within the nursing facility and, if unavoidable, die there with palliative care, should be carefully evaluated. However, this is only possible if palliative care is fundamentally improved. This includes a Palliative Pandemic Plan for the inpatient and outpatient care of Covid-19 patients.²²

The limits of ethics and dealing with incriminatory decisions

Christian ethics knows about the limits of ethics in general, of the fallibility of humankind, of guilt, but also of forgiveness. The ethical conduct in hospitals and nursing homes operated by the Church or by Christian social welfare organisations should be shaped by this insight as well as by a spirit of power, love and consideration. In concrete terms, this should be reflected in the way ethical consulting is provided and utilised, which can probably still be improved and expanded in many areas. Hospital staff not only need ethical advice, but also psychosocial care and pastoral support – not least in order to cope with possible feelings of guilt. Hospital chaplaincy can make an important contribution here (cf. 1.3).

²² See e.g. the position paper of the Austrian Palliative Society on COVID-19, https://www.hospiz.at/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/OPG.DokumentCOVID19-2020_03_25-final.pdf, 20 March 2020 (most recently accessed 9.12.2020).





4. Koinonia – Living in One World

4.1 The quest for community across borders and the longing for home

Living together is a core basis for community

As the limitations connected to the pandemic hit, the importance of neighbourhoods and local communities became once again clear in reciprocal aid and the management of quarantine situations, when neighbours went shopping for each other and provided emotional sustenance from balcony to balcony. While local and regional community identities increased in significance, nationality was of less consequence. Even movement-restricting measures and border closures intended to protect the people living together at a distinct place from the transmission of the virus through the minimisation of outside contact did not, first and foremost, concern nationality.

Correspondingly, nationalist parties and groups did not derive large-scale political gain from the pandemic.

Interdependencies and solidarity

Within societies, solidarity and cohesion were demanded in the face of the pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic made it clear that no society can exist in isolation, but is interdependent in many ways. As in no other crisis before, these interdependencies were also felt in the global North (and therefore, led in many countries to calls for more independence from the global South). Trade routes and supply chains were disrupted, and the economy suffered even in areas where the pandemic had not (yet) spread, since raw materials and the supply industry were cut off. This demonstrated the need for solidarity between societies and states, as was expressed, for example, in the joint development of vaccines and the undertaking to also make them available to poor states at affordable prices (cf. 1.1)

In spring 2020, when the pandemic hit Europe in the first place, church leaders and ecumenical officers from many Protestant churches in Europe reported that they received numerous letters of solidarity from partner churches in the global south. Until then, they were used to only writing such letters. They expressed the comforting effect of these letters and reported that their feeling of being part of the one world increased.

Churches offer home and create community

The churches united in the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe have a double orientation. Due to historical experience and geopolitical determination, they see themselves as caretakers and bearers of local identities and culture, especially in diaspora situations, but simultaneously they are obliged to think and act transnationally. They understand their togetherness as *koinonia*, as a communion based on the common faith in the triune God and experienced and filled with life in common worship, in common theological reflection, in common witness and common service to the world.²³ Although the Protestant churches are strongly rooted in the language, culture and history of the various nations, they understand themselves as parts of this larger community that transcends language, culture and peoples.²⁴ From this insight, they intend to contribute to overcoming fears, demarcation and populism, and demand that governments and societies take greater responsibility for our one world.

Churches offer people a home; a place of belonging. During the pandemic, it became apparent that many people were looking for mother-tongue forms of communication for existential questions. Offers of online church services in Poland or Hungary, for example, were strongly taken up by compatriots living abroad. People living in another country informed themselves about the Covid-19 regulations of their home country as well as in their country of residence. Just as the government has responsibility not only for its citizens but for the whole population, the mission of the churches is not only directed at church members in the narrow sense, but at all people. Local church congregations and pastors in diaspora situations, where several ethnic groups and denominations have lived together for

centuries, possess intercultural experience, especially in the field of church communication and pastoral care. Such potentials of experience should be specifically requested and promoted, particularly in the time of the pandemic. Consequently, it is also part of the mission of the churches to create offers of spiritual and pastoral care in different mother tongues, and this can also be achieved through increased cooperation with churches of other languages. Modern digital communication channels provide good opportunities for this.

4.2 Women, families and domestic violence

Women bear the brunt of extra work during Covid-19 crisis

Times of instability and crisis tend to increase our longing for trusted structures, for familiarity and for home (cf. 4.1). At the same time, the Covid-19 crisis and the restrictions that come with it have resulted in significant challenges in particular to women and families. A recent study (Bertelsmann 2020)²⁵ reveals that additional chores such as home schooling, cooking, cleaning and childcare have been predominately carried out by women. Yet about half of them feel they have reached the limits of their physical and emotional capacities. The combination of working from home, home schooling and the absence of childcare services, often compounded by loss of income, existential insecurity and cramped quarters at home, can quickly become a toxic mix.

Rise of domestic violence during Covid-19 crisis

While domestic violence was a problem before Covid 19, incidences have risen significantly across European countries. According to Helena Dalli, Member of the European Commission, in France reports of domestic violence have gone up by 30% since the first lockdown in March 2020, Cyprus recorded a 30% increase in calls placed to a help line, while a help line in Belgium showed a 70% increase in calls.²⁶ The vast majority of victims are women and children. Victims of domestic violence are isolated in an unsafe space, often together with the perpetrator, and they have limited access to help and support. The fact that all social strata are affected by domestic violence points to the complexity of this issue. Any crisis lays bare elements within ourselves that we would have never expected to

23 Cf. Mario Fischer / Martin Friedrich (Eds.): Church Communion. Principles and Perspectives (Leuenberg Documents 16), Leipzig 2019.

24 Cf. Mario Fischer / Martin Friedrich (Eds.): Church – People – State – Nation. A Protestant Contribution on a Difficult Relationship (Leuenberg Documents 7), Leipzig 2019.

25 <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/de/themen/aktuelle-meldungen/2020/dezember/corona-traditionelle-aufgabenverteilung-im-haushalt-belastet-frauen-stark>.

26 Cf. <https://www.fr.de/meinung/corona-krise-frauen-kinder-brauchen-mehr-schutz-13757365.html>.

find, both good and bad. When people start hurting their loved ones, they oftentimes feel estranged from themselves. Feelings of shame can then prevent people from getting the necessary help. How can the Church create an atmosphere that on the one hand serves to protect victims from domestic violence, yet at the same time encourages perpetrators to reach out for help and deal with their shattered self-image?

Domestic violence as a topic for the church

Regrettably, women, families and domestic violence have so far received little attention in public Covid-19 statements by theologians or churches. As a public witness to Christ and his gospel, however, the Church acts in vicarious representation (cf. 2.1), especially for those who cannot act and speak for themselves. As brothers and sisters in Christ, we live not only by being with each other, but also by being for each other (Dietrich Bonhoeffer). “If there is pain in one part of the body, all the parts will be feeling it.” (1 Cor 12:26) Churches are therefore alert to the specific challenges faced by women and families and to the sometimes hidden, yet ever present problem of domestic violence. Churches take a closer look, provide education in non-violent conflict transformation, and offer swift and concrete support to those in need. By this means, the Covid-19 crisis can become a chance for the churches to critically and self-critically engage with patriarchal structures within their own communities, lives and teachings, and to become agents of change for true gender equality and peaceful conflict transformation.

The United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Argentina runs an ecumenical project called “El encuentro nos transforma” to help women subjected to domestic violence and intervene in cases of child abuse. The intervention plan was modified when the corona crisis hit, with workers now visiting women at risk in their homes, providing food and financial support to cover basic needs such as rent subsidies, and offering psychological support. The project helps women set up micro-businesses as a means of independently earning a living and thus escaping dependency under violent conditions.

4.3 European unification and solidarity in times of Covid-19

Solidarity overcomes mere national interests

The pandemic has proven to be a time of executive authority, but has also fostered the resurgence of the nation-state. Despite all appeals for European togetherness by the European Commission at the beginning of the health crisis, member states acted in an uncoordinated and often selfish manner. Borders were closed and travel bans issued without due notice, critical medical goods were suddenly put under an export ban, enormous national subsidies were set up to rescue national industries. The spirit of European solidarity seemed to dissolve also due to a lack of EU competences in the areas of health care and vaccines.



But after a short shock moment, European thinking and action took over again, be it by working together with European industries to increase the production of masks, gloves, tests and ventilators, by creating the SURE programme for short-time work schemes to avoid mass unemployment in the EU's member states, or by setting up a vast vaccine portfolio to allow all European citizens to have access to vaccines as quickly as possible.

The pandemic is a stress test for European solidarity and unity,²⁷ and the common answers are far from flawless. The crisis highlights the interdependence of European economies and their vulnerability as well as the fragility of the health sector in many countries, where especially health and care workers from Eastern Europe are filling the gaps while they would be desperately needed in their home countries, too. The pandemic trains a spotlight on social inequalities and injustices in the EU and could deepen societal frictions and social imbalances. (cf. 3.1) The closing of borders at the same time amplified the huge achievement of European unity, namely the Schengen area, where open borders allow the free movement of people, goods and services.

The future of the European unification process is up to social justice

The crisis underlined once more that the EU is not only based on mutual economic benefits and a common market, but also builds on the readiness to show support and mutual solidarity in times of crisis. These extraordinary

times are showing that the challenges can best be handled in a joint effort despite all set-backs. The comeback of the nation-state seems more than ever an illusion in a globalised world. The necessary economic recovery can only be achieved together, and NextGenerationEU is a good starting point for investing in green and digital transformations. Nevertheless, more needs to be done to overcome social inequalities and to achieve an upward convergence of social standards across the EU, for example by implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights. When, if not now, could the EU demonstrate its added value to its citizens by providing sustainable answers to social challenges and by finally adding the much-needed social dimension to Economic and Monetary Union?

As churches and Christians, we are committed to European cohesion and togetherness. In the CPCE, we stand especially for cooperation and community across borders. The reason is that our faith and our fellowship know no boundaries – peace, justice and caring for creation are concerns that do not end at national borders. Therefore, the churches – united in diversity – consider it pivotal to overcome borders and social differences that prove destructive in order to work together for the common good. We see the pandemic as an opportunity for more, instead of less, European integration and are willing to contribute to the future outlook of our common Europe, also by having our say in the planned conference on the future of Europe.

27 A strong signal of European unity was sent out by the July 2020 Summit of the European Heads of State and Government agreeing on the next multiannual financial framework and an extraordinary recovery fund called NextGenerationEU to help the European economies rebuild after the Covid-19 pandemic. After difficult negotiations with the European Parliament, the EU member states finally agreed on a package totalling EUR 1.8 trillion in December 2020, which will be the largest stimulus package ever financed through the EU budget.



Suggestions and questions for further discussion:

1. Which of the four mentioned signs of the church is a strength of your own church / congregation / agency?
 - a) Would you agree with the corresponding chapter in the text?
 - b) How did the pandemic change things? Why?
2. *Leiturgia* – where could you witness or provide “Trust against Fear”?
3. *Martyria* – which message(s) did your church/congregation/agency emphasise in its public witness during the pandemic? Why?
4. *Diaconia* – where are fairness, justice and care challenged? How?
5. *Koinonia* – which relationships were helpful, and which became challenging during the pandemic?
6. Which issues from the paper are rarely/not discussed in your context? Why?



Gemeinschaft Evangelischer Kirchen in Europa (GEKE)
Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE)
Communión d'Eglises Protestantes en Europe (CEPE)