

Synodality in the Church

Evaluation of the request of the German Bishops' Conference to the member organisations of the Council of Christian Churches in Germany (ACK)

The President of the Commission for Ecumenical Relations of the German Bishops' Conference, Bishop Dr Gerhard Feige, Magdeburg, has informed the churches and ecclesial communities, associations and organisations joined in the Council of Christian Churches in Germany (ACK) about the foundations, ways and goals of the synodal process of the universal Catholic Church and invited them to participate by sharing with the Catholic Church their experiences, assessments and proposals on the subject of synodality in the Church.

A total of 13 of the 29 ACK member organisations addressed responded (of eighteen members nine, of seven guest members three and of five observers one group), as well as the Board of the ACK, which the President of the Commission had also informed.

A first evaluation of the initiative has been included in the report of the German Bishops' Conference to the World Synod of Bishops 2023 "For a Synodal Church – Communion, Participation and Mission" (cf. Report, I.3, available at <https://www.dbk.de/themen/bischofssynode-synodale-kirche-2021-2023>).

A differentiated analysis of the responses received shows that they can be classified into five groups depending on the church or church community. The answers compiled in groups reveal a specific profile of each group. In this respect, the overview compiled here has been based on a denominational point of view, on the self-descriptions of the churches and communities. In the following, the doctrine and practice of individual churches and ecclesial communities are outlined, which are exemplary for the respective group.

1. Synod as a central body

a) In its response, the **Protestant Church in Germany (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland – EKD)** first states that the synodal culture of the Protestant Church is the result

of a development that has been achieved over a period of approximately 150 years and has been repeatedly revitalised by new impulses. During this period, a strong synodal culture has developed in the Protestant Church in Germany. In all church constitutions of the regional churches, the synod occupies a central position; it is designated as the central representative body. The Protestant synods have emerged from a parliamentary tradition and, like this, possess the sovereign right of all parliaments, namely budget planning and budget decision-making. Synodal governing bodies, as at the level of the EKD, are formed at all three formative levels of the Protestant regional churches, namely as parish council, district synod and regional synod. The synodal constitution of the Protestant Church thus realises a high degree of active participation of all believers. It is a representative constitution that follows democratic standards and is bound to the confession of faith.

b) In its response, the **Council of Anglican Episcopal Churches in Germany** points out that the Anglican Church as a whole is governed at all levels by synods. In its self-description it says: "Episcopally led, synodically governed". At all levels, decisions of the Anglican Church are made jointly, in matters of liturgy, doctrine, structure and strategy. However, it is ensured that fundamental decisions can only be taken with the consent of the bishops and the representatives of the clergy and laity. Synodality is an essential feature of the Anglican Church.

2. Synodality and episcopality

a) Synodality in the **Moravian Church in Germany / Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine** is historically characterised by two poles, namely, on the one hand, by the strong central leadership, emerging from its central figure Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf, and, on the other hand, by the idea of theocracy or, rather, Christocracy. This idea found expression in the 18th century through the use of lots. Decisions made by leading persons were submitted to Christ as the "General Elder" of the community by lottery. This Christocratic idea also gave rise to the Watchwords of the Moravian Church, which are still highly regarded in ecumenically oriented Christianity today.

Today, *Unitas Fratrum*, the official name of the Moravian Church, is a worldwide church active on most continents. Its highest body is the Unity Synod, which meets every seven years and consists of elected representatives from all provinces. Between these synods, the leadership of the worldwide church lies with the Unity Board, which is made up of representatives of the leadership of the provinces and meets every two years. The body for day-to-day management

is the Executive Committee, which is made up of representatives from the four regions – Europe, North America, Caribbean, Latin America/Africa. The congregations in Germany are part of the European Continental Province of the Moravian Church. This has placed all areas of activity in eight different European countries under the joint highest body of the (Provincial) Synod.

At the same time, it must be noted that the ministry of bishops in the Moravian Church, which emerged from the strong central leadership of its founder, still has a special charisma and form today. It is a purely spiritual office without administrative leadership tasks and powers. Episkopé in the sense of formal supervision, on the other hand, is in the hands of the Synod and the committees elected by it. The bishops have the right of ordination; they are charged with the ministry of unity. Despite this still outstanding importance of the ministry of bishops, the synod is responsible for the actual church leadership. In this respect, the Moravian Church is a presbyterial-synodal church at all levels. This system of governance is influenced by parliamentary democracy.

b) The **United Methodist Church in Germany (EmK)** also sets out its view of synodality, although it is characterised by a different term, namely that of conference. The conference system plays a prominent role in the organisational structure of the EmK. At local level there is the “Bezirkskonferenz”, regionally the District Conference, for a larger area the Annual Conference. In addition, there are the Central Conferences or, as in the USA, Jurisdictional Conferences, in which several Annual Conferences work together, as well as the General Conference as the highest body of the universal Church. The conference system emerged from the Methodist movement of the 18th century in England and comprised the meetings of the clergy with the lay preachers who worked as evangelists and cared for the newly formed communities. From this conference system, very different organisational models have evolved, which have been further developed in the various branches of the Methodist Church. However, the Annual Conference is the fundamental body in the church. The constitution of the Evangelical Methodist Church in Germany, for example, states that it is a medium-level authority in which all decisions necessary for the congregations are made. It has financial sovereignty, personnel sovereignty and also decides on the admission of applicants to pastoral ministry. The Conference is led by a bishop who is also responsible for giving important impulses and for "leading".

The system of conferences within the EmK is designed to involve as many people active in church work as possible in decisions of the church at the various levels and thus to interlink

them with each other. Admittedly, this conference system must be viewed in an ambivalent way, as the EmK itself states: Some congregations feel very strong and want to regulate matters that concern them on their own; other congregations, which do not see themselves as self-responsible, are more like branch operations of the conference.

3. Free Churches: Congregationalist Constitution

a) The **Federation of Pentecostal Churches (BFP)** basically states that for each individual member of the community the personal relationship with Jesus is clearly of primary importance. Thus, the personal experience of salvation, given by God, is an outstanding concern of the Pentecostal church movement. Synodality must also be placed in this personal relationship with Jesus. The BFP sees itself as a synodal-congregational organisation. Each congregation arranges its own affairs independently. Leaders are elected, appointed or confirmed. This local church principle is the basis for a synodal order, which, however, does not have any outstanding significance in the BFP.

b) The **Union of Evangelical Free Churches in Germany (BEFG)** is made up of 800 Baptist and Brethren congregations. It too is organised in a congregationalist way. Congregationalism is a constitutional norm of Protestant churches based on the conviction that the congregation gathered locally is the basic form of the Christian church. From this it is concluded that the supreme governing body of a local congregation is the assembly of all congregational members and that supra-local associations have no legally binding authority over the local congregation. Nevertheless, Baptist local churches join together in a federation because they know that the body of Christ is greater than the local church or the individual church. However, this makes it clear that cooperation in the federation is merely a kind of working community. For Baptist congregations, the priesthood of all believers is a basic structure given by Christ, which aims to make the believer who is responsible before God the anchor point of congregational life. From this perspective, it is understandable that the term of synod or synodality is not familiar in Baptist congregations. Congregationalism is an understanding of the Church that sees the local congregation as a synod of individual believers and the National Council as a synod of individual congregations.

c) For the **Federation of Free Evangelical Churches in Germany (BFEG)**, too, synodality is not a fundamental structural principle. Of course, the local congregations also join together

in a federation, and the federation leadership has a moderating and guiding character. As for the hierarchy, it is very flat.

4. Hierarchical structure without synodality

Fundamental to the **New Apostolic Church** is its strict hierarchical structure. Church congregations and districts are not synodal and are not governed by church councils. However, there is a close connection between local believers and the respective higher decision-making bodies. In addition, for years there have been advisory bodies at all levels of church activity, staffed by office bearers and lay people, and at the level of the Regional Church the National Assembly has opportunities to participate within the framework of the constitution, especially in economic matters. This is also a consequence of developments in the 1980s and early 1990s, when there was increased criticism of statements of the doctrine of the faith, of existing church structures and of decision-making processes that were perceived as non-transparent, as well as a lack of opportunities for participation in the inner-church shaping process. However, the New Apostolic Church does not have a structure like that of the Protestant Church in Germany, with organised synods from the bottom up. In its letter of response, the New Apostolic Church presents its fundamental understanding of church and ministry. Within this, the apostleship, which contains all the sacramental powers necessary for the Church as a whole, is of central importance.

5. Synodality in Orthodoxy: Bishops and Laity

From the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox side, the Orthodox Bishops' Conference in Germany, the Armenian Apostolic Church in Germany as well as the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch in Germany have responded to the letter of the President of the Commission for Ecumenical Relations.

The response of the **Orthodox Bishops' Conference in Germany (OBKD)** emphasises that according to Orthodox understanding, the Church is always synodal, which is expressed in its administrative structure. This includes above all the synodal bodies at the level of the individual patriarchates. In this context, a "synodal permanence" is mentioned in the letter. With regard to the level of Orthodoxy as a whole, the format of the Synaxis of the Heads of the Orthodox Autocephalous Churches introduced by Patriarch Bartholomew is cited and reference is made to the Holy and Great Council of Crete. The point of reference for the theological justification

of synodality is above all the writings of Metropolitan Ioannis (Zizioulas), who considers a synthesis of pneumatology and ecclesiology necessary for an appropriate understanding of synodality and outlines synodality as a form of expression of being Church which aims to secure the right balance between unity and diversity. One point which addresses difficulties with the implementation of synodality is the question of the relationship between clergy and laity. Here, the question of a latent clericalism in the Orthodox Church is raised self-critically. This leads not only to discrimination against the laity, but also to an isolation of the clergy. The letter therefore concludes with an emphasis on the communal action of clergy and people in the Eucharist. Eucharistic ecclesiology, from an Eastern Orthodox perspective, is an essential foundation of the synodality of the Church.

The response of the **Diocese of the Armenian Church in Germany** highlights above all the participation of the laity in the election of the diocesan bishops as well as of the Catholicos of All Armenians. In the National-Ecclesiastical Assembly, which elects the head of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the laity form the greater majority of the delegates with approx. 70 %. With regard to the issues dealt with in the Synodal Path of the Catholic Church in Germany, it is pointed out that the Armenian Church knows the ordination of women as deacons and that the possibility of a choice between celibate and married priesthood has advantages in many respects.

The letter from the **Syriac Orthodox Archdiocese of Antioch in Germany** emphasises that synodality is an essential element of being Church, dating back to apostolic times. The response describes in two parts first the practice of synodality at the level of the Patriarchate of Antioch, then within the Archdiocese of Germany. With regard to the Patriarchate, the importance of the Holy Synod as the highest authority of the Church in religious, spiritual, constitutional and administrative matters is emphasised. It is a purely episcopal body that can only act and make decisions under the presidency of the Patriarch. From the Syriac Orthodox perspective, the unity of the Church is fully realised in the community of the bishops. At the diocesan level, in Germany there is the Pastoral Convention (Pastoralkonvent) as an association of all priests of the archdiocese, as well as the Diocesan Council (Diözesanrat), which consists exclusively of lay people who are elected by the parish representatives at an assembly of delegates. A link between the two bodies is ensured by the fact that two representatives of the Pastoral Convention are permanent members of the Diocesan Council, just as conversely two representatives of the Diocesan Council regularly attend the Pastoral Convention. The highest decision-making and executive body of the archdiocese is not the Pastoral Convention, but the

Diocesan Council consisting of lay people, which, however, also meets under the presidency of the archbishop. At the congregation level, the laity also play a relatively important role, because the parish council they elect is not only responsible for the administration of properties and finances, but also determines – together with the archbishop – the number of parish priests and the persons chosen for this ministry.

6. Conclusion

The responses received can be read primarily in terms of denominational studies. Synodality and its structural principles are each derived and explained from the own church history; thus a diverse panorama of different developments and experiences in dealing with synodality initially emerges. What is clear, at any rate, with regard to Protestant churches is that synodality is adopted as a democratically determined principle of political and social order that has been integrated into the church structure in the course of the last 100 years. Above all, it emphasises the empowerment of all believers active in the church and, as one free church put it, it also brings to bear the principle of the priesthood of all believers. In Orthodox churches, synodality is derived from its ecclesiological origin. Synodality in the Oriental Orthodox Churches is characterised by a strong position of the laity, whereby at the same time the importance of the episcopate is underlined in order to preserve the unity of the Church. All in all, it can be seen that the specific forms of synodality show that the original experiences of the respective churches and communities are crucial for the development of a specific synodality.

In this respect, it is particularly noticeable that the EKD's answer in the sense of a strictly synodal basic order apparently only applies to the EKD, but not to the individual regional churches (Landeskirchen). For a more accurate picture, the respective regional churches would have to be questioned, especially the Lutheran churches, which have an episcopate as an element of order, which is connected to the synodal form of organisation, but also has an independent character. This is shown by the structure of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Germany (VELKD) which, in addition to the synodal constitution, also has episcopal associations as governing bodies.

The denominational explanation of what synodal means indicates that the outstanding significance certain synodal elements have for a particular community does not necessarily apply to another community as well. This limits the value of the statements made to the extent that negative as well as positive experiences in the respective churches or ecclesial communities cannot simply be transferred to the further development of synodal structures within the

Catholic Church. However, the overview shows the diversity of synodal structures that have become historical and their theological justification in the churches and ecclesial communities ecumenically linked with the Catholic Church.