

A low-angle photograph of dandelion seed heads against a clear blue sky. The seeds are in various stages of dispersal, with some still attached to their stems and others floating in the air. The lighting is bright, creating a warm, golden glow on the seed heads.

focus

Rich Relationships

The Joint Task of the Church as Diaspora

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Legal notice

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Rich relationships – the joint task of the Church as diaspora

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Foreword

Dear readers,

This edition of *focus* about diaspora theology is an abridged version and further development of the study document “Theology of Diaspora”. In view of the minority reality of most Protestant churches in Europe and the development of church membership numbers in the large national churches, the General Assembly of the CPCE held in Florence decided in 2012 to work on this topic.

A study process was launched to reflect theologically upon the minority situation to design a positive, integrative concept for self-understanding as a minority church based on a new interpretation of the concept of diaspora. Throughout, theological considerations should form the core of this self-understanding and the ensuing behaviour and action as a church.

The aim of this *focus* booklet is to support Protestant churches in Europe in reflecting theologically upon their minority situation – which is perhaps only just happening – in order to enable them to grasp the opportunities and possibilities this presents for being Church together as followers of Jesus Christ in the world.

Determining the theological concept of diaspora is therefore meant to offer a chance for self-reflection and provide inspiration, attempting to achieve the following:

- The self-understanding of diaspora should make it possible to tackle challenges productively and creatively, even as a church is turning into a minority. This should also create a hopeful outlook on existence as a minority.
- The strength of the theologically determined concept of the diaspora lies in its *illustratively groundbreaking expressive force*. In this respect, a corresponding self-understanding as diaspora can do better justice to both the purpose of the Church of Jesus Christ and current social conditions and problems than a sometimes negative minority narrative.
- As the diaspora concept is filled with the idea of the unity of the *Church of Jesus Christ*, self-understanding as diaspora connects the churches in Europe with and amongst one other and demonstrates what the churches in the world have in common.
- *A common self-understanding as diaspora* can thus also lead to an exchange of experiences and ideas amongst the churches, as the experiences and actions of other churches in their minority situations can be understood as a resource for all.

Structure

In Part I, the minority situation is briefly presented as the current or future reality for the vast majority of the churches in the CPCE. This includes addressing challenges and problems, but also pointing out the risks and temptations of a negative minority narrative.

Part II describes, based on the new interpretation of the concept of diaspora as “interspersed”, a theological self-understanding of existence as diaspora.

In Part III, a selection of examples from the member churches of the CPCE located in different parts of Europe reveals productive and creative approaches to existing as a minority – entirely in the sense of the proposed self-understanding of diaspora.

On the last page you will find questions to reflect upon yourself and for further discussion. What strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and possibilities do you see for the described self-understanding of diaspora in your particular context and situation?

Intended readership

This *focus* booklet should appeal to anyone who likes and enjoys reflecting upon the Church and its meaning and purpose in the world with regard to its actual or progressively minority situation in Europe.

It is aimed specifically at:

- Church congregations
- Pastors
- Persons in leading roles in the churches
- Ecumenically open-minded and interested people



I. From worry to hope – from feeling in the minority to diaspora existence

Churches heading towards being a minority – or already there

For Protestant churches, being in the minority in your own country is not the exception in Europe – it's the norm. Depending on the definition, between 450 and 800 million people live in Europe. Some 50 million are members of a Protestant church, 21 million in Germany alone. Most Protestant churches have been living in a minority situation in their countries for a considerable time; some always have, others only fairly recently, and yet other churches are heading that way nowadays. Protestantism in Europe is a minority phenomenon – and it is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future.

Churches' worries about the future and existential fears

At times, minority churches' limited means and lack of resources lead to their lives and daily routines being dominated by worries about the future and nerve-racking dealings with problems and challenges. Small or decreasing numbers of members, large and expanding catchment areas for individual congregations, scarce or dwindling financial resources – these are all worries and problems about which all Protestant churches in Europe can sing a melancholic song. The minority situation can most certainly feel like an existential threat.

More than just a fact – the minority blues

Being or becoming a minority may be a reality – a sociological fact. However, to call oneself a (turning) minority and to feel like one is often more than that – it can be linked with an evaluation ... and a negative one at that! In that case, the fact of being or becoming a minority does something to your self-esteem, to your self-image. It then affects how you assess your own opportunities and abilities, your particular role in the country and possible relevance for people and for society – indeed your own joy and desire for the future.

The term “minority church” reduces a church to numerical proportions and tends to debase its own existence. It’s being small and few – or getting smaller and less important. It’s about continually losing value and importance, and being increasingly pushed to one side. Thus minorities at times feel under pressure to justify their own existence.

To start with, “minority” is actually a neutral sociological description. At the same time, it can be associated with a negative evaluation, a negative self-evaluation. Potentially, this can turn into a powerful group-psychological narrative that spreads within the church. Worries and fears, resignation and lethargy, discouragement and bitterness are then often the consequences of feeling in the minority. The lack or loss of positions of influence and scope for staffing and funding are possibly also mourned, not infrequently coupled with a mindset of rejecting others outside the church.

Regarding the minority situation – focusing on problems or opportunities?!

There are several ways to deal with the situation of the Church in Europe, to see one’s own situation and to react to it – or rather take action.

One possibility can be described a *problem-centred or problem-oriented* approach. Taken to the extreme, the problems and the challenges that seem to threaten the church’s own existence occupy its full focus, and all efforts are centred on maintaining itself as a church.

A different path is adopted by vision- or opportunity-oriented approaches. They soberly recognise the situation as (becoming) a minority. However, the focus is on the *meaning and mission of the church’s existence in the world*. This also means that not the problems and challenges themselves, but the meaning and mission are the starting point and focus of all deliberations about how the church acts and behaves. The task is then to find a creative way of dealing with the problems and challenges – seeking the possibilities and potential that present themselves in order to work as a church in the world.

A theologically interpreted concept of diaspora can and should lead to such a vision- and opportunity-oriented self-understanding.



II. Diaspora existence as the destiny of the Church

Being a minority confronts a church and a congregation with challenges and sometimes major problems. However, a distinction must be drawn between tangible, actual challenges – such as financial and staff shortages – and possibly bruised self-esteem and overbearing worries about the future, which can have equally tangible consequences for the church's own behaviour, scope for action and potential for making an impact.

Solutions must be found for both, for the factual challenges and for the possible gnawing at self-esteem. The proposed self-understanding as diaspora carves directly into this situation and can become a real support. The potential that is harboured by the concept of diaspora and can be so figuratively expressed in this way lies in the church viewing itself and others through the lens of meaning and task. Perceiving itself as diaspora can thus unleash new prospects, scope for action and potential for the future.

Understanding diaspora dynamically as “scattered into the world”

A positive interpretation of the term “diaspora” is therefore well suited for a new self-understanding because it stems from the purpose of the church in the world and, as a figurative concept, can bring this vividly into sight.

The understanding of “church as interspersed” forms a special relationship both between the churches (I) and with the people in the respective society and other social institutions and organisations (II), which will now be described in more detail.

Diaspora (Greek: διασπορά) is derived from the Greek word for seed/grain: “σπόρος”. It expresses the idea that the church is “scattered” or more specifically interspersed (διά-σπορά – διά in the midst) by God into the world and to the people, in order to bear good fruit for others and the church by virtue of the Gospel.

Diaspora as interspersed expresses a fundamental relationship between church and world, between church and humanity. For being interspersed emphasises that the church lives in the world, in the midst of it, and connected with people.

Being interspersed by God to bear good fruit for oneself and others then means exploring ways in that state to be a witness in word and deed to the good news of God's universal will of salvation and love.

A life in relationships is the consequence of the interspersed existence and the mission of the church. In this way, diaspora symbolises how the church is sent into the world and to the people.

The developed diaspora concept understands the meaning and purpose of the diaspora in consciously shaping relationships in the sense of following on from Christ. This is expressed in the guiding principle of a “church with and for others”.

If the Church considers itself as diaspora – as being interspersed into the world – this expresses its purpose. A positively slanted concept of diaspora can thus become a guiding theological concept for churches.

II.A. The common origin of interspersion: The Church of Jesus Christ in the World

1. Interspersion and the Church of Jesus Christ

If diaspora expresses and symbolises the *purpose of the Church* (singular!), it is clear that no single church can claim to be *God's sole interspersion into the world*. Church does *not give itself its purpose* – it is *given it*. In order to communicate the Gospel of the good news of the dawn of the Kingdom of God as God's will of salvation and love to the world, the *Church of Jesus Christ* is interspersed by God into the world. Every church that sets out and follows this interspersion has a share in the Church of Jesus Christ and thus in its interspersion. With the self-understanding as diaspora, every church is thus an equal part of an extensive community with a common origin.

Having spoken with one of the fathers of the Leuenberg Agreement, the founding document of the Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe: The term 'diaspora' has an inherent meaning that cannot be restricted to the situation of small confessional minorities, but addresses the fundamental situation of Christianity per se in the world (Wilhelm Dantine).

2. Thinking diaspora ecumenically

The Church of Jesus Christ is interspersed in the most wide-ranging contexts and situations in this world. According to their confessional traditions and historical imprints, the churches can understand themselves as different shapes and forms of one interspersion, without denying or being able to deny the others being co-interspersed. Despite, and precisely in their different cultural imprints and also confessional traditions, the churches can recognise and affirm their kinship through this interspersion.

Through common interspersion, the self-understanding as diaspora has a basic ecumenical structure and leads to ecumenism. Thus, a common self-understanding as God's interspersion into the world can contribute to overcoming alienation and tense relationships between churches in order to venture down new paths together.

Furthermore, both majority and minority churches can experience that they are not alone in their own situations through the ecumenical ties that transcend them. This enables them to perceive challenges for other churches that may face similar, perhaps even greater challenges. Perhaps they nevertheless know how to deal with them creatively – which could provide inspiration and pinpoint areas of learning for their own situation.

Diaspora is not a denominationally restricted, but – on the contrary – an ecumenical project!



3. Potential of the ecumenical understanding of diaspora – sources of inspiration and fields of learning

Diaspora always transcends the situation of each individual church, its own cultural imprint and national character. An awareness of diaspora can thus enable us to look beyond our own horizons, contexts and internal logics. Then the experiences and perspectives of other churches can provide bursts of inspiration for our own thinking and a field of learning for all. The wide range of situations and experiences and the respective approach of each individual church can thus become a strength and resource for others. The emerging pluralism is therefore seen positively in the understanding of diaspora.

With the perspective of Church as interspersed and the strong affinity that comes with it, *other churches* can be perceived more strongly as *sister churches*. As diaspora, it is important to seek a relationship with brothers and sisters in faith and to actively shape these relationships together.

Diaspora promotes international networking between the churches. This exchange makes it possible to seek and provide correspondingly pan-European answers to European problems. One example is the phenomenon of Euro-orphans. Richer, western countries in the European Union attract carers from financially poorer countries such as Romania or Slovakia to care for their own often over-aged population, who return to their home country for only a few weeks a year. As a result, an entire generation is growing up without biological parents – known as Euro-orphans. Since the problem transcends the borders of individual states, churches can only respond to this European problem together in a larger, European community.



4. Learning things from others that concern everyone – diaspora churches as avant-garde

If minority churches consider themselves diaspora in the sense described above, they can view their previous experiences as a treasure trove for others. It becomes apparent what they have already learned and achieved in their situation. They can offer their wealth of experience to others as resources, as pointers to guide them into their future. Minority churches have played and continue to play a pioneering role in this respect; they are – and can see themselves as – the avant-garde in Europe. Thus, churches that are currently still in a majority situation can also look to smaller minority churches for help and advice in order to learn from them and their ways of acting and living.

- Minority churches have often proven over many years that it is possible to be a viable and living church even with scant resources of any kind.
- This has involved taking new paths in often difficult external circumstances with scarce resources of their own and also being creative in devising other means of dealing with challenges. A certain openness and willingness to experiment was and is necessarily part of such a search for a creative way of dealing with challenges, since new, as yet unknown paths have to be sought and ventured down.
- In the process, minority churches all over Europe have learned that they cannot and do not have to do everything. They have learned to weigh things up and prioritise – and then to act purposefully. In the face of important tasks, they have injected their own resources and had to creatively seek additional means to support them. In doing so, they approach and have approached others, and try to persuade church and non-church collaboration partners with convincing arguments and to forge relationships and create networks. Thus, they harness synergies to reach their goal.

The key term here is synergy, from the Greek συνέργια – “interaction or cooperation” – a compound noun formed from the Greek σύν (meaning with/together) and ἔργον (meaning work/action). Minority churches are often too small to be able to handle all the work alone – and they don’t have to! For from the perspective of diaspora, the mission of the church is fulfilled collaboratively and using synergy, as shown in the examples presented in Part III.

- Minority churches are often well networked internationally, sharing information and nurturing contacts with other churches in different countries, both majority churches

and other minority churches. In this way, they experience both support and uplifting assistance from outside.

- Small membership numbers and sometimes large catchment areas mean that minority churches automatically have many points of contact with others, and they often have their ears closer to the ground with more direct social contacts. This makes it easier for them to be a *listening church* and to recognise people’s problems.
- Minority churches also have the advantage of living “sine vi, sed verbo” – “without human power, but by God’s word alone”. Without such “power”, and without having to fear for worldly privileges, they can only win over potential collaboration partners and the various decision-makers with convincing arguments. In this way, the diaspora can feed the truth of the Gospel into different areas of social life and raise its voice for peace and justice “sine vi, sed verbo”, without having to consider other interests.



5. The decision of faith in the face of one's own situation

However much an awareness of diaspora leads to ecumenism, and as much as the diaspora situations of other churches can become a resource and an area of learning, the actual decision on how to act as an interspersed church in a specific context can only be made by the actual church itself.

Situations are sometimes comparable, but no two situations are completely alike. Churches' historical, cultural and political contexts are shaped in different ways, giving access to very disparate resources and generating different imperatives and logics for realising their own interspersed church. Some churches in Europe are closely linked institutionally to their country as state churches (such as in Denmark); others also enjoy far-reaching state privileges, e.g. as corporate bodies under public law (such as in Germany), while some are cut off from any public support whatsoever (as is widespread in France). Nor are the problems and needs identical between different countries. Hence the situations of churches in the different countries of Europe, and of the congregations at the grassroots, present different possibilities for action. Therefore, each *particular, specific situation* affects what needs weighing up and prioritising, as churches have to look for creative ways of handling resources, including treading new paths.



II.B Church with and for others: the common mission of the interspersed church

6. Church as a connected part of the world

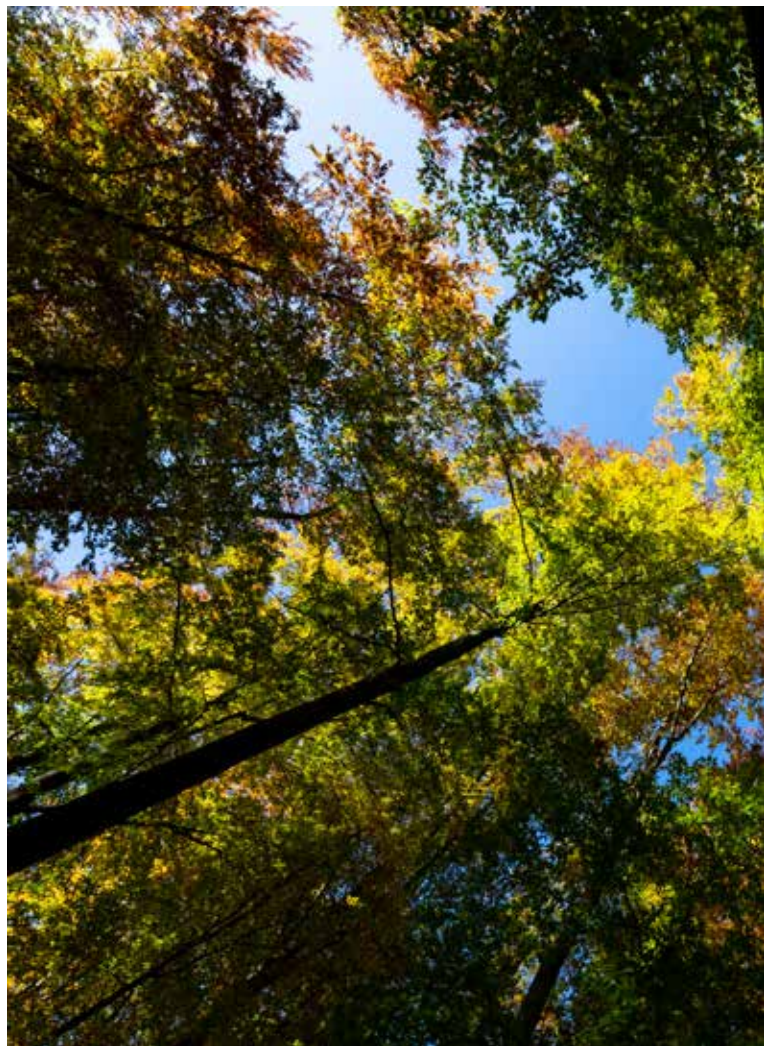
God's will of love and salvation applies to the whole of creation. His love for it places Him in a permanent and inseparable relationship with His creation. Thus, the Church, which sees itself as the Church of Jesus Christ, cannot stand apart from the world. In the past, for various theological and historical reasons, there have always been efforts and currents to turn away as a church from the environment in order to remain for and within itself. The *image of the churches being interspersed* obviously contradicts this and emphasises a different self-understanding – as a *church interspersed throughout the world* is consciously part of this world and inseparably connected with it. In following Jesus Christ, it seeks to be connected to the world, affirms its interspersed nature as a mission to the world and to people, to bear witness in word and deed to God's will of love and salvation. As an interspersed church, it rather sees its environment as its *co-world*, and the people in it are considered to be its *fellow human beings*.

The Church neither merges with the world as an interspersed church, nor can it as an interspersed church withdraw into a supposedly separate, ecclesiastical sphere.

The dynamics of interspersed church: Follow God's love – seek connection with the co-world and our fellow human beings!

7. Large or small, what makes a church Church?

For a long time, to be the majority was tacitly, and for some also incriminatingly, regarded as the *normal state* for the Church in the world. However, a look back throughout history shows that the Church has always maintained its meaning and task in different majority and minority situations – which have sometimes also changed quickly within a country. Thus numbers and majority/minority relations cannot express the purpose of the church; and therefore nor is a diaspora understanding of the Church a matter of membership numbers. Rather, the normal state of the Church is to live and want to live in connection with the world, i.e. in *relationships*. If diaspora is understood as the normal state, it is thus not size that determines whether this is also Church, but rather living in relationships and shaping them within the scope of its possibilities.



The understanding of Church as an interspersion means that neither existing in the majority nor in a minority is the normal state, but rather living in relationships and remaining alive in them.

8. The normal state of Church – in relationship

A self-understanding as diaspora is not a naïve pipe dream – rather, a diaspora existence already corresponds in many places to the reality of every church.

Minority churches, in particular, often live in a true polyphony of different relationships. Due to their small size, they cannot remain aloof and thus actually live in a factual and multifaceted wealth of relationships! This richness is simply not revealed exclusively within a church and its own congregations. Due to low numbers and often broad scattering, small churches are located in a very wide range of places and have points of contact with other churches and non-church members in society – and, as we have seen, also further away. Internationally often well networked, they cultivate contacts with churches in other countries, both majority churches and other minority churches.

The diverse relationships in which churches live are focused on through the image of interspersion and thus made visible as a wealth. The potential and strength of diaspora existence lies in relational diversity. Living in diverse relationships is therefore both the normal state and an opportunity for the Church.

The factual relational richness of even smaller minority churches is often neither seen nor valued – but precisely herein lies the potential and strength of diaspora existence.



9. The normal state of Church – interspersion is also a challenging task

If the Church's own self-understanding as an interspersion brings relationships into focus, then this makes realising and shaping them a permanent task.

Relationships cannot be taken for granted; they need cultivating, and this also requires actively working at communications at the same time. Such cultivation of relationships, both within the Church and externally, is both a way of life and an expression of life for the Church. From the perspective of diaspora, it becomes both daily business and a crucial skill.

The normal state of Church becomes challenging and difficult, even threatening, when the will to relate to the rest of the world is hardly reciprocated. The Church of Jesus Christ was and is always interspersed into contexts and various places that can also be openly hostile to it. Diaspora as an interspersion, the will and conviction to live in relationships and a wealth of such, is anything other than a feel-good agenda, especially in such cases.

Such difficult situations are certainly a reality for some member churches of the CPCE. However, the past experiences of various minority churches also show that things do not always have to stay that way. In these cases, churches will live in hope of and trust in reconciliation, and will do what they can, at least on their part, to contribute to peace. This includes upholding their offer of a relationship and continuing to carefully seek out opportunities and possibilities for shaping relationships, in the spirit of Jesus Christ and as a living witness to the Gospel of the dawn of the Kingdom of God. The common self-understanding of diaspora can have a strengthening effect here if sister churches in other countries also stand by these churches and actively support them within the scope of their possibilities.





10. The Church's way of life and expression of life as Church with and for others

If, in its self-understanding as an interspersion, the world is understood as a co-world and people are seen as our fellow human beings, then Church plays its part in social challenges and problems. If a church takes its interspersion on board, it will also make social cohesion its own task. Within the scope of its possibilities, the church then tries to make its contribution and to confront problems that affect itself and others. But it does not do this alone – that would run counter to its self-understanding as an interspersion. Rather, it will seek to harness synergy effects to find solutions in relationships with other churches and other cooperation partners. A church that is aware of its diaspora existence always conducts public theology in this sense, since it doesn't only think, act, pray and live for itself, but also with and for others.

In this sense, diaspora is about living in relationships in the world and shaping these relationships. It is about seeking out others in order to shape things *together*, i.e. to face problems together. As diaspora, the Church works for good coexistence and better togetherness, in the immediate church environment, in the region, in society, indeed on the continent and – not least in view of the climate crisis – in the world that we coinhabit. Understanding oneself as interspersed therefore means being Church for and with others.

Diaspora churches can contribute in word and deed to collaborations according to their conviction fuelled by the Gospel. They do this without claiming a particular privileged status for their own position – and at the same time without denying or even concealing their conviction and their character.

The meaning of diaspora is to form relationships within the realms of one's own possibilities – Church is thus Church with and for others.

11. The special service of the Church: building bridges!

It has been passed down through the Gospel that Jesus of Nazareth did not stay away from others. He lived in close relationship with God and with others and reached out to other people. In his actions and behaviour, he built many *bridges* between God and people, between people to one and other and, last but not least, he opened up paths for people to themselves. Often enough, he built bridges to bring marginalised and disenfranchised people back into life and into the larger community. In this way, Jesus Christ can become a role model for the churches to act as bridge builders.

Bridges connect what is separate. They create opportunities for encounter and exchange. Churches can also help build bridges in their work on relations and communications, providing many and valuable translation services. As a special service to neighbours and society, they can thus contribute to mediation and affiliations amongst them. They can help when social or psychological crises arise for individuals or groups and also mediate in cultural and political conflicts.

Minority churches have also been and are bridging points of many kinds – between nations, between eastern and western Europe, between conflicting parties, between denominations, and also between Christians and non-Christians. Through their diverse relationships and points of contact with different people and groups, churches can create contact zones that can become places of dialogue and thus connect people with one another. After all, diaspora consciousness connects the local level with the global, the regional with the European level. Through their rich network of relationships, churches can mediate in conflicts and draw attention to different national perspectives in order to contribute to peace overall in accordance with the Gospel. Last but not least, churches can become bridges between Protestant faith and secular lifestyles, between Christian interpretations of life and other religious orientations. Seen in this way, diaspora communities can be bridging points, not only places of mediation and encounter, but also places for finding identity.

Living together in society is never just easy or smooth. Thus many forces are needed to have a positive, nurturing and integrating effect here – for individuals, but also for different groupings within society. A church with diaspora self-awareness that takes on this function out of its most fundamental self-understanding as an interspersion can become a valuable part of the whole, both for individuals and for the common whole.



Thus, a self-understanding as diaspora can also enable minority churches to recognise the multi-layered and dynamic fabric of relationships in which they live and at the same time motivate them to help shape it constructively. In this sense, it is important for these churches to consider where bridges have been formed, and thus dialogue already takes place, and how to proceed in the future.

Diaspora churches are often already bridging points because they unite several cultures and ethnicities under one roof. Where churches represent a minority not only in a denominational sense but also due to the original background of the majority of their members, they are sometimes called double diasporas. In such cases, it will be important for this double minority situation to not further reinforce self-seclusion and self-demarcation, but to use this as an opportunity and resource to bear fruit.





III Examples from member churches in the CPCE

The following section provides real-life examples of diaspora existence.

There are many examples of churches and congregations that do not let their minority status stop them from doing great and wonderful things far beyond their apparent capacity. The examples presented in this next section are only a small selection – showcasing churches and congregations that demonstrate in their actions where a self-understanding as diaspora can also lead. These examples express life in relationship, where relationships are actively shaped. This generates events that build various bridges, creating places for encounter and dialogue.

The contexts of the various CPCE member churches are, as mentioned, different – with regard to both their particular social circumstances, framework conditions and necessities and also the resources initially available to the churches and their own imperatives. To a certain extent, these examples are bound to their particular context and

cannot be adopted 1:1 – so others will need to rethink and adapt ideas to suit their own circumstances. However, each example shows a purposeful, creative way of dealing with challenges and resources in the search for feasible pathways in their particular situation and context. They reveal how existing potential is used and greatly increased through collaboration and synergies. Their examples can thus serve as a stimulus and inspiration for discovering new scope for action and shaping one's own situation, thus revealing possibilities for action and potential for the future, and so it can be said: A diaspora existence is possible and it is worthwhile!

Faros – a lighthouse in Athens (Greece)

The Greek Protestant Church is one of the smaller member churches of the CPCE. It has 5,000 members, just under 1,500 of whom belong to the three congregations in Athens. The church looks back over a long and strong diaconal tradition, and it has also engaged in working with refugees for more than 20 years. This has presented an enormous challenge specifically to Greek society in its entirety, and

example shows that the initiative for an important project does not necessarily have to come from a church or congregation in order to be able to shape relationships together with and for others in the sense of a self-understanding as diaspora. On the other, it also shows the transnational support that exists between different churches, entirely in the spirit of their common diaspora existence.

The initiative led to the founding of a decidedly Christian non-governmental and non-profit organisation (NPO) in 2014 called Faros – Lighthouse. Faros focuses on work-



not just since 2015. Above all, children and young people arriving as unaccompanied refugees face an uncertain and threatened future. They often have no choice but to start their new lives on the streets of Athens, in public parks, or under other precarious conditions. Without support, without families and without a social network, there is little hope for them of a promising future in the midst of society.

With its limited resources, the Presbyterian Church of Exarchia in Athens did its utmost in this respect. When two private individuals approached the congregation with their request in 2011, collaboration was quickly agreed. In order to be able to attend to the plight of unaccompanied minors and make a real contribution to this problem for society as a whole, congregations and church associations from Denmark were soon brought on board as ecumenical partner churches with robust resources, together with other International Aid Services. On the one hand, this

ing intensively on relationships between its staff and the children and young people. In addition to protecting the children and young people, a holistic approach is taken to building bridges in many different ways. First, there is an *outreach* team of street workers who actively seek out children and young people on the streets and in the parks of Athens. The primary goal is to build trust and relationships in order to support them in their lives and show them ways out of homelessness and into a safer life. Faros then offers them the opportunity to spend their time during the day in the *drop-in* centre in downtown Athens, where, in addition to shelter, they are also offered food, educational opportunities and language courses together with leisure and sporting activities. Faros employs social workers, psychologists, lawyers and a number of volunteers. In addition, the project has some long-term accommodation in which it can offer 24 unaccompanied minors a home. Here, too, the focus is on strengthening the children's and

young people's self-esteem through intensive guidance and support after often traumatic experiences and in potentially still traumatising living conditions, and helping them to recognise their self-worth and dignity. To this end, a special education and training programme was also developed in collaboration with the "Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) – D-Lab" to enable these children and young people to train and develop their skills and talents in their new home. In a close relationship with the unaccompanied children, bridges are built towards a safe life, to the host society and towards a promising future as

every year exclusively into diaconal projects in Italy and abroad.) In addition, volunteers also come from various churches in Europe to help out and play their own part. The local churches, with their broad networks of relationships throughout Europe, spearhead this work.

<https://faros.org>



an operational part of society. Faros has an integrating or inclusive effect here and is thus also able to build bridges between cultures and nations. In addition, a family centre was founded to offer refugee mothers and their children a safe place to rest and get the products required for everyday life. The work of Faros would not be possible without international support and involvement. In the meantime, a wide-ranging and worldwide network of different civil society and ecumenical church collaboration partners has formed, which supports the work of Faros financially and with staffing and ideas. The project is currently receiving support from the Evangelical Church in Westphalia and the Evangelical Waldensian Church. The funding from the latter stems from the Italian state's "otto per mille" cultural tax. (Italians get to choose which religious community or charitable organisation should benefit from this 0.8 % of their income tax – the Waldensian Church channels the considerable funds it receives from this scheme



Fortified churches – the common cultural heritage for the future (Romania)

Amongst other things, Transylvania in Romania is famous for the more than 160 fortified churches that have been preserved there, seven of which have even been designated UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Following the exodus of a large proportion of the members of the Evangelical Church A.C. in Romania (ECR) since 1990, the ECR has shrunk from 102,000 members back then to less than 12,000 today – equating to 85% fewer members over 30 years. Most congregations can and could no longer afford the upkeep and thus also to use the fortified churches, with neither the necessary financial nor human resources to maintain and care for them. However, these churches are not only monuments for the almost thousand-year history of the Church of the Transylvanian Saxons and as such important for this confessional identity – they are also symbolic for the region, and cultural-historical monuments to the rich common heritage of the country.

The ECR declared preserving and maintaining its cultural heritage to be one of its primary aims. This therefore forced it to seek creative ways of tackling the financial and human resource challenges, and so a broad-based plan was developed. Amongst other things, the ECR set up a foundation as an independent, non-profit, non-governmental

organisation (NGO) for the preservation and sustainable use of a cultural landscape of more than 160 fortified churches and another 100 or so town and village churches, most of which date back to the Middle Ages. Bridge-building actions can be seen in several aspects of the foundation's work.

The foundation has actively searched for cooperation partners for assistance with funding and human resources in order to be able to plan and work collaboratively. From the very outset, it has been financed mainly by donations, grants and endowments. When Romanian President Klaus Johannis and the German Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier agreed to become joint patrons of the foundation, this raised public awareness by demonstrating that Romania and Germany value and take on this heritage as a common European cultural asset.

The foundation actively searches for experts, interns and volunteers who can channel their commitment into helping with the tasks at hand. Cooperation with other European churches is also bearing fruit, such as in 2017, for example, when a group from the Evangelical Church of Central Germany (ECC) travelled to the region with construction experts to provide hands-on assistance. This is also an example of solidarity and synergy between churches in different countries, which is both a reality and a task of a diaspora existence in ecumenical solidarity. In addition, relationships are cultivated with similar institutions at

home and abroad – for example, the Fortified Churches Foundation collaborates with the “Mihai Eminescu Trust” (MET), which pursues similar aims for the region.

Its activities now go far beyond the practical preservation of monuments and take a long-term approach, including developing plans for multifunctional and subsequent uses for church buildings. The foundation is active in the areas of education, specialist tourism, public relations and fund-raising, in close cooperation with regional and international partners. It organises cultural and specialised events and exhibitions, promotes tourism around the cultural sites of the region, and supports environmentally friendly activities, mainly on church-owned land. Relationships are cultivated with the media in Romania and abroad, including constant efforts to raise awareness of the outstanding importance of the ECR’s valuable cultural heritage for the whole country.

Through its wide-ranging activities, the ECR Foundation actively contributes to the revitalisation of the region. Tourism harbours great potential for the future on several levels and is aimed at Romanian and international visitors alike. Cultural tourism is a sustainable form of expanding the use of the fortified churches and makes it possible to generate income for the preservation of the buildings. Until the outbreak of the corona pandemic, the number of visitors increased significantly year upon year. Long-term partnerships can be built up through specialist tourism, which is primarily aimed at institutions with a wider specialist interest in the fortified churches. In tandem with this, the church is bolstering its offers for holiday pastoral care. By establishing pilgrimage routes and designating wayside churches, the ECR can offer people from home and abroad opportunities to meet one another on pilgrimages, to find themselves and meet God.

Finally, active efforts are being made to encourage the local population to take part and help preserve, maintain and use their cultural heritage. This is achieved by focusing on creating personal relationships – familiarising local inhabitants with their ecclesiastical and cultural heritage in personal encounters and promoting an appreciation of its value. In this way, people are encouraged to become involved in the protection and possible further use of the fortified churches.

<https://kirchenburgen.org>





Joint Public Issues Team (JPIT) – together for peace and justice (UK)

According to the latest large-scale survey (“Faith Survey”), the majority of the population in Great Britain describes itself as Christian. By far the largest church in terms of membership is the Church of England, which enjoys extensive privileges as the country’s state church.

In order to speak with one voice in public debates and thus lend more weight to their own voice as minority churches, the “Joint Public Issues Team” (JPIT) was founded in 2006. It is a cross-denominational cooperation of Protestant minority churches, founded by the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Methodist Church and the United Reformed Church (URC). Other minority churches of different denominations from England, Wales and Scotland have joined over the years. The Church of Scotland, which has a comparatively large membership, also participates as an associated partner in the work and activities of JPIT. This

is the case when it comes to matters that affect not only England, but the whole of Great Britain – decidedly also for the reason of not working in isolation from each other and thus doubling up. Together, the JPIT represents a good one million Christians in this collaborative arrangement.

The churches pool their human and financial resources, share their expertise and provide JPIT staff from their own ranks to conduct the JPIT’s extensive work. This distributes the burden of the very wide-ranging tasks across different shoulders, which is what makes the work possible at all.

The JPIT’s motto is “Churches working together for peace and justice”, and the churches understand their common effort as living and expressing the Gospel of Christ in Church and society. Thus the churches are united by a common goal. In the interest of peace and justice, they publicly address a wide range of issues and problems in society as a whole – highlighting social justice issues and protecting the marginalised and poorest in society, working to protect the environment in the face of the climate crisis, tackling asylum and migration issues, and working for an open, welcoming culture in England and across the UK.

To achieve its goals, the JPIT works in three ways, building multiple bridges:

1. *Advocacy*: Standing up and speaking out for certain positions and groups in public debates in the public sphere. On the one hand, this includes organising meetings with decision-makers (incl. political), and the JPIT also participates in committees of the United Kingdom Parliament (to which the JPIT is repeatedly invited). On the other, the JPIT communicates its own stances in the wider public arena through the media.
2. *Campaigning*: Conducting joint campaigns on the various topics of interest, which are supported and promoted on the ground at regional and local level by the partner churches.
3. *Information*: Wide-ranging information work on the actions and self-understanding of the JPIT. Here, too, the churches act as multipliers through their respective communication channels, both in their own churches and towards the public.

The JPIT also organises conferences with experts on specific issues, commissions independent studies on the

impacts of government measures, publishes substantial background information on its topics and is active in the media in the form of social media posts and a podcast ("Faith in Politics"). Furthermore, forums are organised to gather a larger number of agents of civil society so as to interconnect everyone.

Bottom-up processes are also seen as important and are actively supported. At regional and local level, the JPIT promotes groups and local churches to raise people's awareness of peace and justice issues, to connect them with one another, and to provide platforms for them to table and present their concerns and experiences.

The JPIT openly expresses its Christian background, which is thus always recognisable in all its actions and activities. In addition to the team's hands-on work, there are also invitations to pray together for various causes, especially for peace and justice. Furthermore, thematic evenings with Bible studies are organised. Fundamental questions about the JPIT's activities are also discussed in various formats, such as the relationship between Christian faith and politics, in which they reflect upon their own actions and also open them up to public debate.

The work of the JPIT would not be possible without intensive work on relations and communications. Constant consultations within the JPIT team and between the churches are an absolute must in order to be able to speak with a common voice and act together. By shaping and acting in relationships, many bridges are built for and between people, cultures and nations in the face of a wide range of public issues and challenges. Thus, the JPIT is in many ways an example of what is meant by the outlined understanding of diaspora and what courses of action can ensue.

<https://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk>

<https://www.facebook.com/jointpublicissues>



Enabling experimental zones – a structural change from below (Austria)

Touching on 280,000 members in a population of almost nine million, in terms of its membership, the Protestant Church A. and H.C. in Austria is an average minority church within CPCE. In 2021, the Protestant Church A.C. launched a process entitled “Living from the Gospel” in order to learn together what the future of the church could look like and how it can be shaped. The project is comparable with other reform and structural reform processes currently taking place in various CPCE member churches.

The initiative stems from the steering group of the church’s governing body – but the ideas for the individual experimental zones have to come “from below”.

The idea is to stimulate a *bottom-up* learning process. The purpose and aim of the process is for communities to acquire extensive freedoms, both financially and legally, in order to gain scope for innovative approaches on the ground – as experts on their own situation and their needs. This releases a lot of creative energy. Unlike previous structural reforms, no “big solutions from above” are proposed. Instead, different approaches are tested and supported on the ground, recorded, evaluated, discussed and adapted. The hope is that these experimental zones, which are initially conceived for a limited period, will prove their worth and thus also be able to serve as an object lesson that will enable other congregations to implement tried-and-tested approaches in their own settings.

Congregations, parish associations, or even whole regions can apply with a detailed project proposal to implement their idea. A suggested approach to discovering and designing these experimental zones is to think both in terms of *gifts* – which gifted people are already present in the congregations, or which resources are already available – and in terms of tasks – what is needed in the congregation or the region. The experimental zones are then assigned to three different overarching topics and areas of work, termed “pillars”. Projects assigned to the pillar “Luminous rooms of the Gospel” conduct work on the contents and forms of Protestant identity for a contemporary and radiant Evangelical mission to the world. Projects in the pillar “Serving Together” set up and support service communities. The “Beyond the Horizon” pillar encompasses projects to get parish and regional development

activities up and running. This kind of collaboration at regional level streamlines and relieves the burden on individual congregations (spiritually, or also organisationally, administratively and corporately) by creating something new in common. Each pillar and its projects are assigned to a working group on a church-wide level, which accompanies the respective initiatives, networks them, provides any possible assistance, and reflects upon them with the aim of harnessing added value for the church as a whole. In addition, there are regular online get-togethers for congregations to share ideas, talk about their experiences and get feedback from other congregations. This obviously leads to all kinds of bridge-building amongst the congregations throughout Austria.

The church leadership earmarked a considerable sum of money for these experimental zones, and the synod also created a far-reaching legal framework to unleash this room for manoeuvre. For example, the possibility was created of introducing new professional roles in the church, both in and for congregations, and to employ staff, which was especially important for the service communities but also for projects with a focus on regional development.

So far, 34 applications for a very wide range of projects have been approved, which are now in the implementation phase:

A parish in Innsbruck is creating the professional role of “parish manager” – including education and training – to work closely with pastors and take on management and coordination tasks, also to leave pastors more time to spend on people and their core tasks.

Under the motto “Protestant in Graz”, all Protestant congregations in the city are now working together to help the numerous arrivals in a new part of town settle into their new neighbourhood and help establish a nascent sense of community. Welcome festivals are organised and act as bridges for exchange and dialogue between the new residents, between new and old residents and, of course, also between them and the churches.

The newly founded “Café Memory” has created a meeting place for people afflicted by forgetfulness or dementia and their relatives in two Viennese parishes. A full-time staff member leads the “programme for mind and body”, which focuses on fun and generating small senses of achievement. In an adjoining room, the relatives have the opportunity to swap notes, talk about their experiences, or simply drink coffee and chat together.

Twelve Protestant parishes with approx. 13,000 Christians in Oberwart, in the eastern Austrian state of Burgenland, have now joined forces to jointly tackle important tasks and employ full-time staff between them. Under the motto “Protestant in the District of Oberwart”, there is now a joint administration (e.g. for church fees, building, rental and lease contracts, etc.), and offers for children and young people are also being conceived and run across numerous parishes. Church music is being organised collaboratively for worship, and a varied musical programme is offered in the parishes to suit different occasions.

<https://evang.at/projekte/aus-dem-evangelium-leben>



Further questions

- *What strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and possibilities do you see for the described self-understanding as diaspora in your own context and situation?*
- *What challenges and problems do you face in your situation as a minority, or if your status is heading in that direction?*
- *How do you consider the chances of a self-understanding as diaspora proving encouraging and helpful in this regard?*
- *Can the diaspora metaphor of the interspersion of the Church of Jesus Christ as a divine seed be helpful in your context to express and symbolise the purpose and way of life of the Church?*
- *In terms of churches' factual "rich relationships", which had you until now not seen in this light, taken for granted, or felt not worth mentioning?*
- *Have you as a church already received valuable sources of inspiration from other churches – also outside your country – and been able to learn something from their wealth of experience?*
- *How do you assess the potential for the described self-understanding as diaspora to contribute to a greater willingness to cooperate between the churches and non-church partners? What could you do to make this more likely?*
- *Where does your church already form bridging points? Where and how would you like to contribute as a church to bridging events in the future and be places for encounter and dialogue?*
- *Were the examples inspiring for you – did they spark any ideas for your own similar projects and processes? Where would you have to rethink and adapt things to suit your own situation and context?*



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