

Presbytery Report from Bochum, October 2020

English-speaking Christian Congregation (ECC)

Lockdown

As was the case in every other congregation in the International Presbytery, our worship and activities in Bochum were also hard struck by the Covid-19 pandemic. The Pauluskirche where we worship right in the centre of Bochum was closed for worship for a full six months from March to August 2020. Although the German congregation has now resumed gathered worship, the ECC is still operating digitally, although we are investigating the possibility of resuming some form of worship in church. Instead of the normal capacity of ca. 200, the maximum number of worshippers allowed in church is currently only 44, considerably lower than our average attendance of ca. 60.

Bureaucracy

Germany being Germany and Germans being Germans, everything is done with meticulous thoroughness, and this also applies to the approval of hygiene concepts within the structures of the local church. It was only this week that choir rehearsals were approved under similarly cautious conditions, with a maximum of 17 singers plus choir director scattered around church and seated far apart from each other. Our choir director plans to resume rehearsals soon.

Worship

Having provided what we chose to call “Worship Toolkits” on our website on a weekly basis from March through to August, we are now worshipping on Zoom at our regular 12.30 slot on Sundays. This has had the refreshing aspect of sharing with each other, indeed two members currently in Rwanda and Uganda, have been joining these services on a regular basis. The worship toolkits are essentially a series of videos, many of them self-produced, with prayers, hymns and reflections posted in the worship section of our website. These are still online and can be visited and/or used at any time.

Bible Study

During August and September, we ran a 7-week Bible Study series on Parables in Matthew. There were two options to join – a Garden Group which met on Sundays outdoors in a member’s back yard, and an Online Group which met on Tuesdays using Skype. The Garden Group had six regular participants and numbers in the Online Group varied between three and six, including the mother of one of our members joining from New Jersey.

Children

Our Kids’ Church set up a WhatsApp group in an attempt to keep in touch as long as meeting together remains impossible. Quizzes, colouring pages and other material from Sermons4Kids as well as Age Group Resources from the Spill the Beans lectionary-based material are exchanged via this chat / social media facility. Children are also involved in the form of story-telling and the occasional colouring competition in our Zoom worship.

Planning

Plans for the March 2021 IP meeting we are scheduled to host in Bochum are essentially on ice. A hotel close to the railway station and to the church has been earmarked though not finally booked. We envisage problems with the church halls originally planned for the Presbytery meeting and the committees, as only 14 people are currently allowed in the large hall as opposed to the normal capacity of 60-70. If the IP does agree to meet physically in Bochum, we will require alternative accommodation. Similar questions arise with regard to the 2021 IYP, for which Bochum was also mooted as a possible venue. We are also currently negotiating with local and regional church leadership to seek a solution for the ECC beyond my own retirement, which will probably happen in late 2021.

Read on...

Further details of what we’ve been doing to keep our congregation together can be seen from the Pentecost information sheet we sent out to members and friends in the early summer. That newsletter forms pages 2-3 of this report.

ECC News

Pentecost 2020

News and information from the
English-speaking Christian Congregation

Hoping and waiting

At the time of going to print, it remains uncertain when regular worship in church will once again be possible. The latest decision of the German Presbyterium, whose guidance we are following on this, suggests that will not happen before the end of the North-Rhine-Westphalian summer holidays. The question this raises, and the challenge facing us all, is how to *be* church without actually being *in* church, a very apt question for the season of Pentecost, which celebrates the Spirit “blowing where it wills”. In other words, anywhere, everywhere, not just in church buildings.

Regrettable as it may be, the lockdown is at root in the interests of everyone’s health – we are making this sacrifice to protect each other against possible infection with COVID-19. As an alternative to face-to-face worship, our so-called Worship Toolkit has been posted weekly on ecc-bochum.de since the middle of March. The QR code on the right will take you straight there. The toolkit is being used not just locally, but globally and, at 100+ people in 22 countries on five continents, our congregation on the web is actually even larger and more diverse than our gathered worshipping community. There’s also a Sharing Faith WhatsApp group who work through the week’s toolkit together as well as exchanging texts and pictures.



Sharing and growing



And so, a global pandemic has let a global community come into being. For example, one regular online worshipper is Gady Kubwayesu. Gady is no longer in Bochum, but has been back home in Rwanda since July 2019, where he is actively involved in a social project called MJCI-Shalom. Its main aim is “To work for a

better future of Rwandans and their welfare based on the family,” and it does that by the simple yet effective means of helping groups of 25-30 persons to farm together. This not only imparts professional skills, but also heals social divisions. A booklet detailing the work of the project is available as a PDF or in print from Pastor Jimmy.

Another regular visitor to our website is Katherine Masa, who is currently back in Uganda completing the studies she interrupted when she first came to Bochum. She went home just before the lockdown came into effect, and she has sent us her own profound reflections on the situation entitled *Keeping the Faith Amidst Adversity*. Katherine recognises in COVID-19 an opportunity for us to make “basic changes in our core values and beliefs and learn to appreciate humanity for who we are and not for what we are.” Her suggestions on how to cope and keep faith range from ‘embracing modern technology’ to ‘being humble before God’ to ‘not giving up under pressure.’ She summarises: “We should remember that the Lord didn’t promise us a life devoid of challenges. But He promised to give us the wisdom, grace and courage to help us go through the challenges.” Katherine’s full article can be read online on our ECC website at <http://ecc-bochum.de/keeping-the-faith-amidst-adversity/> or in hard copy from Pastor Jimmy.



Net-working

The Church of Scotland's International Presbytery (IP), of which our congregation is an associate member, met in Gibraltar from 6-8 March, only days before the lockdown took effect. Bochum had three reps at the meeting: Pastor Jimmy, Michelle Mizuno-Wiedner of the Church Council, and Dana Buchholz as IP youth rep, all seen here with Revd Ewen Maclean of the host Gibraltar congregation. The October meeting of the IP, originally scheduled to meet in Budapest, will now be held instead on the video conferencing platform Zoom. We are due to host the 2021 spring meeting of the IP from 12-14 March in Bochum; hotel accommodation has already been earmarked (though not booked) for our international visitors but, depending on how the coronavirus situation develops, this too may become a virtual meeting on Zoom. We last hosted the International Presbytery in March 2012.



At a more local level, the Church Council and the ECC Choir have also shifted their activities to the web and are each meeting fortnightly on Skype. If you have any issues you want the Council to discuss, don't hesitate to get in touch so these can be put on the agenda. In addition to networking on Skype, the choir is also 'net'-working and, under Hendrik Ziser's leadership, has produced three anthems as a virtual / split-screen choir for use in our online worship. An online team has also been created to explore how to improve and develop our web activities. Please share any ideas you have with the web team via Pastor Jimmy.

Planning and celebrating

"The best-laid schemes o' mice and men gang aft agley" is one of the most famous sayings by Scots poet Robert Burns. It applies to many of our best-laid plans for 2020. Although it's disappointing that these have had to be cancelled, we can look forward to 'catching up' on them later – they include scheduled guest preachers, ranging from Professor Mark Burrows of the United Church of Christ (USA) and the ethnologist and theologian Dr Anja Stuckenberg (a former Superintendent of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America) to Anglican Bishop John Rucyahana of Rwanda, described in his country's media as a 'spiritual leader and social entrepreneur,' who planned to attend our worship during a visit to Germany in May. Like the church music workshop with Seth Sululu of Mukumira University College, North Tanzania, which was also scheduled to take place in May, the good news is that these highlights have not so much been cancelled as postponed – there's much to look forward to, in other words!

Good news and cause for celebration was sent to us from Glasgow by our former Probationer Minister Jade Ableitner and husband Eric, whose baby boy Frederick Douglas was born on 19 March. Congratulations!

Finally, a Christian Aid prayer based on Romans, Chapter 8 and shared by Revd Angus Mathieson of the Church of Scotland's Faith Nurture Forum: *God of heaven and earth, in these times of isolation, apart from loved ones, distant from friends, away from neighbours, thank you that there is nothing in all of creation, not even coronavirus, that is able to separate us from your love. And may your love that never fails continue to be shared through the kindness of strangers looking out for each other, for neighbours near and far all recognising our shared vulnerability, each of us grateful for every breath, and willing everyone to know the gift of a full and healthy life. Keep us all in your care. Amen.*



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