

FINAL REPORT

VICARIATE ABROAD IN THE UCC 2023–2024

PEACE CHURCH IN KEWASKUM, WISCONSIN – USA

by Vikar Jakob Kröner

Introduction

This has been an extremely special year for me – on so many levels. It is also a special year because the end of this year will not be followed by the planned return to Germany, but by a call to my host congregation and thus my staying here in the USA. This alone suggests that my time here has left a deep impression, so much so that I have decided to plan my immediate future here, including seeking ordination within the UCC. Exactly one year after my arrival here on March 3, 2023, the congregation of the Peace Church, which was once called “Friedenskirche”, will be asked to affirm my call agreement for another year.

Here are some reflections on my experiences this year.

Ecumenical experience

The ecumenical landscape here is significantly more diverse than in Germany. While in Germany the clear majority of Christians can identify themselves as a member church of the EKD or a diocese of the Catholic Church, and only a small percentage belong to other denominations, here this is much more differentiated. In Kewaskum alone there are four larger congregations: the Catholic Church opposite ours, us as a congregation of the UCC, a Lutheran congregation of the more conservative type, and an evangelical congregation. Each of these congregations has around three-digit numbers of members.

From a German perspective, three digits means “not much” – but in fact almost all of these members are paying and active and attend church services. Almost all of these members are visibly integrated into the life of the congregation. While in Germany congregations often have four digits on paper, but only two digits appear in church services and in the congregation, here membership is defined differently in the absence of a church tax regulation: as a member of a congregation you personally decide to support a congregation financially and by contributing time and effort to support the work of ministry. This commitment also applies the other way around: the congregation and the Pastor look after each individual member – and those who are too old to come to church are visited at home by the Pastor or another member.

The theological orientation of the various denominations is of course very different. While the UCC represents a very liberal approach, the Lutherans of the Wisconsin and Missouri Synod are committed to a very conservative Protestantism (comparable to the SELK in Germany) – in contrast to the Lutherans of the ELCA, who are somewhat more liberal. Then you have the evangelical congregations that completely break with classical liturgy but represent a very conservative theology. While in a WELS congregation (Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod) women are not allowed to hold

any public office, in an evangelical congregation they are included (but with clear role expectations...); but anyway: “liberals” and “conservatives” are labels that only cover so much.

The UCC, on the other hand, has long since opened up not only to women's ordination, but also to the inclusion of the LGBT community and other social justice issues.

The Catholic Church, on the other hand, is way more conservative here in the USA than in Germany, something that always surprises me. For many conservative Catholics, the issue of protecting unborn life in particular is absolutely central to their identity.

In the neighboring town of West Bend, where I also live, Methodists and other churches are also represented. All of these denominations live side by side in equal coexistence. The only truly ecumenical activity between these communities is the annual Lenten services in West Bend, which I was able to kick off with a sermon this year. Congregations of the Catholic, Lutheran (ELCA), Methodist and UCC traditions come together to pray and meditate during the Lenten season.

Prospects and problems of American congregations

The different understanding of membership in American churches is a difference I cannot emphasize enough. Yes, there are also many committed members in Germany. But the level of personal and financial commitment that people make to their communities in America is on a completely different level. Particularly in UCC congregations, being together after the service is as much a part of the life of the congregation as the service itself: that's where people exchange their stories and look out for each other. For most people, the church is a second family, and this is often referred to as the “church family”.

There is also a completely different warmth between people, which at least partly has to do with the different, much more relaxed manner in which Americans interact. It's completely normal to address each other by their first names. The Pastor is either just called Pastor (the title is treated grammatically as a proper name, something like: “Pastor told me yesterday...”), or in combination with the first name: like how my mentor is generally called “Pastor Eric”. No one would think of saying “Pastor Kirkegaard” or “Mister Kirkegaard,” in fact such formality would be considered quite ridiculous. After a year here, I can't help but share this feeling a little bit – but the relationship is just completely different in general. Pastors are invited to homes or visit parishioners in the hospital or in the hospice, regardless of their birthday, simply because the person is going through a difficult time. At the same time, the Pastor is not a “buddy”, he is in a clear pastoral role, but within this role he is very close to the people, and that is exactly what is expected of him. In fact, in larger congregations, special “visitation pastors” are employed who are exclusively concerned with visiting parishioners. This close relationship between the Pastor (or the pastoral team) and the individual parishioner is very important.

Another difference is the great value placed on one's own life story. While in Germany there is often little interest in the careers and experiences of others (because that would be too personal), here there is a great deal of interest in exchanging life stories and experiences, and the Pastor in particular is expected to fold this productively into his preaching. In addition, the question of one's own calling and how one experienced it is also central on the path to ordination. Nobody expects a story about how you were struck by lightning one day – but it is important to be able to provide information

about how you developed spiritually on the way to ministry. I was never asked a question like “Why do you feel called to ministry?” in Germany; it was enough that I had obtained the relevant credits at university. – Furthermore, the humor and reaction in the church audience is much more lively than in Germany – this is also a difference in culture.

Committed membership, culture between parishioners and the relationship with the Pastor, all of these are among the great opportunities of American congregations, as all of these still bind many people wholeheartedly to the church. However, I do not see how the passive understanding of membership, as it has developed significantly through culture in general and the institution of church tax in particular, could ever change in Germany without giving up the latter. To express this as a debatable thesis: wouldn't the church have to break away from this umbilical cord, which ensures its current continued existence for at least a few more decades, if only in this way a leap into a new understanding of the church would be possible...? Or is it too late for that anyway... who knows.

Which brings me to the problems of American churches, which, despite all the nice things I just listed, are not so different from the problems of German churches – perhaps the latter are even a glimpse into the future for the former. Here too, almost all churches are experiencing a decline in membership. American church membership, which is still at 70-80% overall, is at the same time steadily declining. More and more teenagers and young adults do not feel understood by the church – and the political interference of the churches on the side of the Republicans not only scares off many young people, but also makes them hate the church and Christians. In a country that prides itself of the separation of church and state, Christian circles actually exert more influence on political decisions than I've ever witnessed in contemporary Europe, and almost always this influence is aimed at restricting the rights of others, especially women (abortion rights) and the LGBT community. Many churches in the southern United States have long defended slavery with the full fervor of the self-righteous – using biblical "arguments".

The Covid pandemic, which only had a marginal impact on membership numbers and Sunday visitors in Germany – regardless of the cracks that sometimes showed within congregations – has left deep wounds here. The political debates about vaccinations, wearing masks and lockdowns have torn many congregations apart. Even within the UCC, some congregations have lost up to half of their members, often to more conservative churches.

At least in terms of construction, American communities have somewhat fewer problems because the buildings are newer and are not listed as heritage sites. Nevertheless, there are of course always everyday things that need to be replaced: electrics, roofs, the omnipresent air conditioning systems, etc. At least almost every church here is heated; congregation rooms (including bathrooms) are integrated directly into the building complex.

So here too it is not the case that the congregations are constantly growing and everything is going well – indeed, the slow but continuous decline in membership that most congregations are experiencing is causing financial and morale problems. Here in America, too, the congregations are often overly aged, although not as much as in Germany – the age between confirmation and the first children is usually not represented. At least, there are still young families in most congregations here.

Expanding my own horizons

In order not to make this report unnecessarily long, I will keep it a little shorter here.

- (inter)national

Of course, the expansion of horizons is immense. Even though I have been able to live in other countries for a longer period of time (Israel and Italy), a country like the USA, which occupies a different position in the global political structure, is an enormously interesting experience. Now that another presidential election is coming up, this is especially true.

- social

Society is accordingly somewhat divided along political lines. It may play less of a role in everyday life than one would think from the news, but the division is still there and is carried into the congregations. The spiteful and disgusting rhetorics in recent years – especially by Trump and his allies – is continually deepening this division further; not dissimilar to the development that we see in Germany with the AfD and in other countries with parties that proclaim comparably inhumane programs. Here I am for once proud of the German churches, which oppose this “Dy-sangelium” with great unity, even ecumenically – that is by no means the case here.

- cultural

I have already made a few comments on this – of course this could be further developed through countless further observations in everyday life. Especially here in the Midwest it's striking how much space there is, everything is just spread out, everything has space; this also means that everything has to be reached and be accessible by car, so there are huge parking lots everywhere. As a European, the absence of bicycles on the roads and the rarity of buildings that are more than a hundred years old are very noticeable.

- theological

I have already mentioned a few things about this: above all, the diversity of theological positions locally and nationally is fascinating. Of course, this also means that you come across many positions that you cannot possibly share, and which are at the same time maintained with great, sometimes uninformed persistence. At the same time, I always notice that almost every denomination has something great to offer: even if it's just musical style, liturgy, etc.

My specific tasks and areas of work during the Vicariate Abroad

My tasks related to every area of congregational ministry: from the children's time at service to the last visit at the hospital, I was able to accompany people at almost all stages of life – and beyond; I recently held my first funeral here (see my blog jakob-in-america.blogspot.com from January 2024 for more details on American funeral culture). In general, the blog offers an overview of the diverse activities that I was able to carry out here. This of course includes preaching, Bible studies and faith formation classes, mission projects (building a house foundation for “Habitat for Humanity”) and much more.

Experiences for further community work and a look into the future

The opportunity to get to know not just a second congregation, but a congregation in a completely different context as a Vikar, can hardly be overestimated in its importance for me as a learner. Now that I'm employed here as an Associate Pastor, also doing chaplaincy work and possibly taking up a position as an Interim Pastor in another church, the view of the future has of course changed from returning to staying. That doesn't necessarily mean that I will stay here for the rest of my life. The German congregations, especially in the countryside, also have a great appeal to me. I remain connected to my German vicariate parish, which I will also visit when I come to Germany in April. (A church service and subsequent get-together are planned.) - The fact that EKBO would not only recognize my ordination here in the UCC, if it comes about, but would also keep the door open for a possible return, made me very happy and reassured.

I never thought that I would go to the USA for a long time, let alone feel the desire and calling to stay here for the foreseeable future - and yet it feels good and right. God's ways with us are sometimes so wondrous and how he threads them into the fabric of our lives. Wherever this path leads, I will always and gratefully be connected to EKBO and UCC - and the people who make up these bodies - and I ask for God's blessing on all of our further paths. May they soon cross again.

Jakob Kröner