

Berlin-Steglitz, 22 December 2016

Christmas Letter and Update from Rev. Dr. Gottfried Martens

“The whole world is at rest” [Isaiah 14:7].

*O heart, how will you read this?
Convulsed in strife, of weal bereft, stripped of peace
Far and wide, the earth is set against you.*

“The world breaks forth into song” [Isa 14:7?].

*Oh heart, how can it wake you, who are stoned by woe?
The globe has distilled much misery
And heaped it up to torment you.*

*Yet He who gave you life and filled your mouth with breath
Himself speaks comfort to you.*

*No pain He hasn't stilled! No work He doesn't do!
Down comes your Saviour from above.*

The firs rejoice. Bright light glows on the sheep pens in the field.

*Come, angel, come proclaim.
What breaks into the night?
Do You come, and come You even unto me?*

*Praise God! In Your light I may see the light,
The Child, the Lord of the world.*

*To Him I will entrust myself, He is the One who upholds
And rescues me in the judgement.*

*From Jochen Klepper's **Christmas Hymn in Wartime**ⁱ*

Dear Friends, Relatives, and Acquaintances,

I send you a hearty Christmas greeting with the words of this hymn of Jochen Klepper, at whose grave I stood once more this year after a burial at the cemetery in Nikolassee. I hope that in this way I can at least stay in touch with you after I found myself almost continually “in emergency mode” this year and therefore was not in a position to give a personal reply to many communications and greetings that reached me directly.

As I have been preparing this circular letter, yesterday and again today desperate reports have been reaching me from members of our congregation: at this time the Federal Ministry for Immigration and Refugees is rejecting almost all applications for asylum from our Iranian and in many cases also from our Afghan congregational members and candidates for baptism, and is sending them their deportation notices.

A few months ago the Federal Ministry considerably increased the number of personnel responsible for hearing and deciding asylum applications. This was of course necessary,

given that many of our congregational members had been waiting three years for their first hearing. Yet not even in our worst nightmares could we have pictured what this change would entail. Almost all congregational members and candidates for baptism are having their hearings scheduled well-nigh simultaneously, and yet the only qualification of those charged with hearing their cases has often added up to no more than a three-week course; many are manifestly clueless about the situation of Christians in Iran and Afghanistan, and worse yet they are utterly clueless concerning questions relating to the Christian faith. But all of this does not prevent them from assuming the role of self-appointed experts, whose questions “unmask” the supposedly deceitful Iranian asylum applicants one after another, even when those hearing the cases don’t even know the difference between the Creed and the Our Father.

Questions are put such as the names of the two sons in the parable of the Prodigal Son, or what Martin Luther died of, or the occasion of Queen Margarethe of Denmark’s recent visit to Wittenberg. In this way Christians who learned the first elements of the Christian faith in their house church in Iran are well and truly hung out to dry. Many hearings are more like kangaroo courts in which our congregational members and candidates for baptism have absolutely no chance of presenting what is important to them. And then they must repeatedly undergo being mocked and laughed at when they relate how it is important to them that Jesus Christ died for their sins on the Cross. One of the hearers is known to write down in the report, when such remarks are made, “What the applicant says here makes absolutely no sense.”

On top of this come then the translators, 95% of whom have no familiarity with the technical terms of the Christian faith, dismiss the holy sacrament of the altar with “after the service we eat cake and drink Schnaps,” and like to translate the expressions of our congregational members with, “He says he doesn’t know everything.” No further translation is needed after this kind of snow job. We have also experienced how the almost exclusively Muslim translators deliberately stick the knife in our congregational members by falsely translating what they say. For the final decision about asylum applications is made by a professional working in an office in another area of Germany, someone who has never in their life set eyes upon the asylum seeker in question, someone who takes their decision on the basis of statements about the Christian faith that have often been distorted beyond recognition.

Even if an applicant for asylum should succeed in getting their statements into the record, in the end they still have almost no chance. Combine “Iranian” with “Christian” and the computers in the Federal Ministry almost automatically build sentences ascertaining that the applicant has no discernible relationship with God and can thus be expected to deny their faith once back in their homeland. This procedure is all the more inevitable should the applicant belong to Trinity, Steglitz, which counts as proof positive that they have not seriously converted to the Christian faith. Almost every day in the last little while I have got to read public slanders and falsehoods about our congregation and my work in it. By now we can scarcely speak any longer of constitutionalⁱⁱ process in the case of our Christian asylum applicants.

Despite all this I am doing my best and for a long time have sat at my desk and my computer practically every night till four in the morning, writing pastoral certificates for the many hundreds of people who just underwent these hearings. And yet it has become clear to me that I am actually writing these certificates only for the next level when the cases go before a higher court, because orders have obviously been given from above no longer to recognise Iranian converts as having the right to asylum in our country. The systemic failure of the Federal Ministry in hundreds of cases must thus come to the light of day through the efforts of the superior courts.

It takes it out of me to share day by day in the experience of this concentrated injustice and in the despair of our congregational members, who simply no longer understand the world. This year many of them suffered violent attacks from Muslim residents of their institutional homes and from Muslim watchmen once they learned of their conversion. Time and again—most recently last week—we have had to collect people from residences, in order to prevent worse befalling them. But our congregational members and candidates for baptism are continually finding that those who attack them and threaten them with death have no problem securing the right of abode here in Germany, while they themselves—the ones under attack—are “exposed” by the Federal Ministry as not entitled to asylum, as people who have come here to Germany simply for fun, because they wanted to make a better life for themselves here. For this they then got subjected to threats and torments in the homes!

After the media took up the topic of attacks on Christian converts in the homes for asylum applicants at the end of last year, we in our congregation became increasingly the focus of media interest in the first months of this year. Several television teams were often our guests on a weekly basis, even from the ARD and ZDF, and they reported the problems very openly and well. Representatives of the press from all over the world pestered me to such an extent that I often hardly knew whether I was a pastor or a press spokesman by profession; it was all rather surreal. And yet at the same time it was clearly evident that the two big churchesⁱⁱⁱ were increasingly stonewalling on this question of attacks on Christian converts, for one thing because such reports did not fit in with their ideology, and for another because as operators of many of the homes in question they had a massive economic stake in not turning over the stones of what was happening in the institutions under their care.

At a press conference in May dealing with the results of a survey of Christian asylum applicants, which had been arranged by the organisation “Open Doors” in conjunction with us, we experienced a concerted action—conducted with the aid of an alleged “exposure” in the Sunday edition of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*—to discredit our work here in Steglitz in an infamous manner and to present us as untrustworthy. All journalists suddenly pulled back from our congregation, a woman journalist of the ZDF being sufficiently honest to inform me that she had received an order from above that it was no longer permitted to report on our work or on attacks on Christian converts.

Then in June the leading bishops of the two big churches reflected on the matter in a joint statement and explained quite openly that they possessed a better overview of the situation than would be gained by putting questions to the affected asylum applicants themselves. The results of their alleged researches were presented in professional “business” idiom:

apart from a few regrettable individual cases, which obviously only ever occur in non-churchly institutions, there is little to report on this topic—the Christian asylum applicants simply did not understand that the conflicts to which they were exposed had as a rule nothing to do with their faith.... Herewith the topic is now closed, even when this fall Open Doors again documented many hundreds of further cases of attacks on Christian asylum applicants in the homes. The journalists are now simply sitting the topic out.

My experiences in the realm of politics have had a similarly sobering effect. At the beginning of the year a party calling itself Christian repeatedly invited me to top-level forums, right up to the Stephen Circle of the CDU-CSU parliamentary party and to a public hearing in its room in the Bundestag. Only gradually did it dawn on me that those who invited me had no interest in protecting Christian asylum applicants, but simply wanted to be able to use me as a kind of fig leaf for a specific portion of their voting clientele. Volker Kauder, chairman of the parliamentary party, clearly had electoral goals in mind when he visited us one morning here in Steglitz and already a few days later proclaimed the exact opposite of what he had promised us only a short while before. Against this alliance of the big churches and politics, those campaigning for real protection of Christian asylum applicants could simply make no headway in the end of the day. We have lost this battle.

In the meantime our congregational members are attacked on the street or in the underground railway if they wear their cross; one of our church council members can no longer spend the night in his residence on account of acute murder threats. Even the police have explained that they can no longer help. The so-called “resources of the constitutional State” afford no protection at all to our congregational members here. In February we experienced how a group of almost 100 radical Muslim asylum applicants attacked six Christians so brutally in their residence that the police ended up having to use their dogs to protect the six Christians from a pogrom. As almost always happens in such cases, a few days later the six Christians were banned from the institution that housed them. Police investigations were discontinued because the attackers explained one after another that they had been attacked by the Christians. And must I still mention that the affected Christians have now also received their deportation notices from Germany? ...By this point I recognise only a grim caricature of Germany as a constitutional State.

I could spend many more pages telling what our congregational members are experiencing on a daily basis here in our country. They don't fit in anywhere. On the one side they are continually threatened by far right circles, with the result that in many areas they hardly dare still go out on the streets, being continually defamed and complained about as refugees. In this context it's impossible to trump the mendacity of those who all of a sudden pose as advocates of Christian refugees after previously wanting to dispatch all refugees straight to the border or, better yet, even shoot them. We can confidently do without supporters such as these! On the other side, they don't fit into the mind-set of those who close their eyes to the massive problems that the migration of many Muslims of often conservative to radical stamp are bringing first of all into the homes, and in the long run will certainly increasingly bring into our country itself.

The burden of these experiences has sent me back time and again this past year to Psalm 146:3, “Trust not in princes, for they are men who cannot help,” and in the midst of these

challenges we have continually been amazed here in our congregation at the work of the Lord of the Church that has gone far beyond what I could have guessed shortly before last Christmas. At the end of last year we had a good 900 congregational members, and in the meantime have almost reached the point of 1,500. Each month we had going on 40 to 50 baptisms, sometimes more. The baptisms were preceded by courses of instruction for which a total of more than 400 candidates came in the first quarter of the year. At the end of a course, each one is examined individually, and whenever I am not convinced that a serious conversion to the Christian faith has taken place, I not seldom put the brakes on the candidate's baptism.

But there have always been sufficient cases in which a serious conversion to the Christian faith was obvious, even if the Federal Ministry questions and contests the spiritual reality of what is going on here in its entirety. Since January we have begun to hold the baptismal services on alternating Saturday evenings, a measure that has proved its wisdom inasmuch as the flow of baptismal candidates has filled our services even further and the number of communicants has grown even more as time has gone on. The enlargement of the chancel, where we can now receive 25 communicants per table, has allowed us to save some time, and we have also once again markedly upped the number of weekday sacramental services that we offer. Even so, since we not seldom have more than 300 communicants, the Sunday divine services naturally last a certain time! We simply could not and cannot heap 15 to 20 baptisms on top of this at the beginning of a Sunday service.

Our services have become "more Persian" this year, as the number of our Persian constituency has grown yet again. I make no bones about the huge volume of organisational and spiritual questions involved in the responsible administration of the sacraments. But I must emphasise as strongly as I can what a joy it is to be permitted to work with these wonderful people from Iran and Afghanistan who have discovered and are discovering the Christian faith for themselves with such joy and vitality. We are so richly gifted with these people that we can scarcely grasp and describe the riches that have come our way. This is especially true of the many who have sought and received asylum this past year on our church premises. Most of these have recently come from Norway, where conversion from Islam to Christianity is practically never recognised as a ground for granting asylum. As convinced Christians, they have fled from Norway to Germany so as to avoid deportation to their homeland.

Offering asylum on our church premises is always a matter of last resort, and each single case weighs heavily on my soul, but we simply cannot look the other way when direct danger to body and soul confronts brothers and sisters of our congregation. This last year a young Yazidi has belonged to those granted asylum on our premises. He escaped from the genocide in the Shingal mountains and was then tortured as a refugee in Bulgaria, a fate that befell many others also. And now he was set to be deported back to Bulgaria. Soon after he came to us, acute appendicitis set in and at the very last moment he was able to be operated on. Had he been deported, he would certainly not still be alive... Every week refugees come to me likewise seeking asylum on the church premises, most of whom I have to send away again, which causes me heartbreak in most cases, since they are truly in dire straits. And yet our resources are limited.... and getting support from other congregations has become almost impossible.

I am most grateful to the “home team” of our congregation, which has continued to support our work with such commitment. In this context I must and wish to name my parents in first place, who not only give themselves fully to the care of those taking asylum here, but who also look after every imaginable practical matter in the house; it is an especial gift that they can still do so much despite their advancing years. I am grateful to those who teach German as a second language, to the members of the church council, and to all who serve in a voluntary capacity. I am grateful to our sister Tarja Ikäheimonen for her work with our Afghan members and candidates, to many of whom she has become a mother; she has taken over much work from me that I simply could not discharge. I am also grateful to the governing authorities of our church, especially to our Bishop Hans-Jörg Voigt, who have so strongly supported us in our work and continued to stiffen our spine. They were prepared to provide a half-time social worker for us, a position Tatiana Lossin from Zehlendorf has occupied with great commitment. It is certainly the case that we could employ three pastors and five social workers full-time! But we should not forget how dependent we are on financial support from the church as a whole and from so many individual donors from all over Germany and beyond...

Our building projects have made good progress this last year. The original building has been restored, and our Bishop was able to dedicate the big new church hall on December 4, and we are now hoping to complete the installation of our big new kitchen by Christmas. Six asylum recipients were tonight able to sleep for the first time in the new second bedroom and thus no longer have to lie on tables or on the floor. The rebuilding of the church hall was indeed a major project, and I am very grateful to the members of the building committee, Thomas Fricke and Andreas Stauber, for throwing themselves into the building process and bringing it to a happy conclusion, even if the finishing touches still remain to be added. Until the first Sunday in Advent every lunch had to be eaten outside in front of the church, because we no longer fit into the premises. And we had nice weather each Sunday without exception. And then it bucketed down on the Sunday after the Bishop dedicated the church hall!

We have obviously noticed that the Balkan route has recently closed, so that the baptismal groups have become smaller of late, even though we still reckon with between 30 and 40 baptisms per month. From the New Year the numbers could drop even further, and yet who knows what manner of surprises the Lord of history has in store for us in the coming year?... The flood of people wanting my personal attention shows no signs of lessening; on Sundays I usually come home in the late evening, and there are always people waiting for me whenever I step into the church building. Once the present marathon of immigration hearings is over, I hope to have more time for people, but then the marathon of court hearings will begin... I really want to pursue my Farsi studies more systematically; to this point I have made more progress and can sometimes conduct a baptismal examination in Farsi on my own. But for right now my linguistic skills are not going to improve much further. Earlier on as I went about my work I struck myself as a juggler trying to keep four or five balls in the air at the same time, but by this point I feel like a juggler with 30 balls trying to keep as many in the air as possible and managing at least to pick up one or two that he has dropped at some stage along the way.

I keep trying to take a week to catch up on sleep, but in the current situation of the congregation it is hardly possible to take a vacation away from Berlin. Catching up on sleep and soaking in a hot tub are my idea of the essence of a holiday, but I can do these things here in my beautiful parsonage. In February I took a day trip to Hamburg for an interview with "Bible TV". Also in February I was on the road with two of our young members for the youth convention of our church on Mount Ludwigstein, and then I headed off with our confirmands at the end of March/beginning of April for a confirmands' retreat and preparation for first Communion in Heldrunen; and in October I spent time with the youth group in Grimma-Höfgen. Breaks such as these continue to bring me much joy. In April I flew on a quick trip to Bonn to deliver a lecture at the annual meeting of the International Society for Human Rights. In the summer we again had a beautiful VBS week at which more than 40 children slept each night in tents in front of the church. I am delighted to have very good and committed fellow workers in our activities for children and youth.

This year I had for the first time a "Persian burial," for a twelve year-old girl from our congregation who died of cancer in April. This was a very moving service, all the more so because some of the attenders didn't realise until they were in the cemetery chapel that they had landed not at a Muslim, but at a Christian burial...

I have rejoiced over the large number of international visitors our church has received this year, above all from our American sister church from which we have welcomed a steady flow of congregational groups. On the Eve of the festival of Christ's Ascension a high-ranking delegation from our Latvian sister church were our guests; Archbishop Janis Vanags preached at the baptismal service. In October we also welcomed as guests the two Bishops of LCMS and LCC from the US and Canada, Matthew Harrison and Robert Bugbee. We are very grateful for these connections with our sister churches.

...At a ceremony in our church on May 28, the "Stephen Prize" was presented for my involvement for persecuted Christians. I am actually not very keen on prizes or laudations, but for the sake of the cause in question, which I was able to articulate clearly in my speech of thanks, I was glad to accept the award. At the beginning of July I had to undergo an operation in the Auguste-Victoria Hospital, which ran into more complications than had been envisaged. So on the following Saturday I conducted the baptismal service like a zombie and was thankful that Bishop Schöne lent me his assistance that weekend. It took longer than expected for me to be back fully on my feet. By now, though, things are back to normal. I am astonished that my health is so good notwithstanding my limited capacity for work, although parts of my body are slowly emitting clearer signals that I am already in my mid-fifties...

I like to look back on November 30, the day of the Apostle Andrew, on which I was able to mark the silver jubilee of my holy ordination with a baptismal service for young people. Eight youngsters, most of whom had taken part in the fall retreat, were baptised on this evening and then received Holy Communion for the first time. Afterwards congregational members very kindly put on a reception. When at my ordination 25 years ago I preached on the words, "The harvest is great, but the labourers are few," I naturally had no clue how large the harvest actually is and how much labourers are needed for the harvest!

I look confidently toward the harvest in the New Year. I continue to learn more deeply what it means to leave the building of His church and congregation to the Lord of the Church, and to trust Him that He has His plans for us and will accomplish them, often enough certainly despite all my failure and all my weakness. For us and also for me personally it should suffice that He knows how things should proceed with our congregation and especially with our many members under threat. Please keep praying for the work here in Steglitz; it is and remains in many ways a spiritual battle loaded with many afflictions and temptations [*Anfechtungen*]. And yet for me personally, even after 25 years it remains the most beautiful service in the world, which I would never exchange for anything else.

Pray above all that all the members who have found their way to our congregation in the last years may continue to hold to Christ and not let their love for their Lord falter! And if the woes of our members, of which I have been reading so much these past weeks in the hearing reports, should heap up to mountainous proportions (even in the form of stacks of folders on the floor of my study ...), and worries galore and reports of terror threaten to “stone” our hearts, it remains the case: “Praise God! In Your light I may see light, the Child, the Lord of the world! To Him will I entrust myself, He is the One who sustains and rescues me in the judgement.”

I wish you a merry and grace-filled Christmas and blessed New Year of the Lord 2017.

Yours,

Gottfried

ⁱ Jochen Klepper (1903-1942) was a man of letters and hymn writer (see. E.g., LSB #337, 885) famous as a noble and tragic figure of the Second World War; my rendition of the German original aims to transmit its sense but lays no claim to convert Klepper’s words into English poetry.

ⁱⁱ “rechtsstaatlich”—after the Second World War it was important to the Federal Republic of Germany that it be a *Rechtsstaat*, a State operating according to Law founded on Right, a State putting justice into practice.

ⁱⁱⁱ The “two big churches” to which Pr Martens refers are the Roman Catholic Church and the “Evangelical Church in Germany”, which consists of regional churches with Lutheran, Reformed, or United roots. Marked by very low attendance, the “big churches” have great financial resources at their disposal as many Germans continue to pay “church tax”. The Independent Lutheran Church of Germany (*SELK*, sometimes known as the “Old Lutherans”), has fewer than 40,000 members nationwide, and is fully dependent on the freewill offerings of its faithful.