

Christian Weisner - 30 years of *We are Church* in Germany

I would like to begin by thanking you, dear Martha and dear Austrians, for your prophetic actions 30 years ago.

How did it start in Germany back then? In 1995 on the 6th of July, I read on page 1 of the newspaper in Hanover - my then home town - about the phenomenal success of the KirchenVolksBegehren, the Church People's Petition, in Austria. That same evening, I rang Bernhard Deflorian in Austria and enquired about all the details.

Of course we had heard about this petition in Austria. At that time I was part of the coordinating team of the German network 'Initiative Kirche von unten' (Initiative Church from Below). But we hadn't yet recognised the explosive nature of that petition.

In Germany at the time, we didn't have an abuse scandal as prominent as that of the cardinal of Vienna. But the reform issues had already been under discussion in Germany since the Second Vatican Council and the subsequent 'Würzburg Synod' in the 1970s. At this German synod, bishops and 'laity' had already spoken out in favour of women deacons, for example. But the Vatican never gave an answer.

In the summer of 1995, we quickly agreed in Germany to adopt the concise text from Austria one-to-one. We only added a preamble to it in order to include the topic of ecumenism, which is important for Germany. Some theologians advised us to refine the five Austrian demands theologically. But we wanted to avoid the endless discussions that were to be expected.

Together with Hans Küng, we launched the German KirchenVolksBegehren, Church People's Petition in Cologne in mid-September 1995. We did it just like you in Austria: without mobile phones, without the Internet and without the 'social media' that are so influential today.



The fact that 16 of the 27 German bishops had banned the collection of signatures on church premises was free advertising for us. The lively and controversial discussions in many parishes and in the media remain unforgettable. After eight highly active weeks, we ended up with 1,845,141 signatures. In relation to the number of Catholics, this was roughly the same proportion as in Austria.

However, the then chairman of the German Bishops' Conference, bishop Karl Lehmann, wrote to his fellow bishops: *"The Church People's Petition was neither a suitable method nor a suitable contribution to clarifying the issues raised, which, incidentally, we would not consider to be the most urgent in the current situation of the Church. ...*

We would certainly discuss the initiative again, but under no circumstances would we pass resolutions of the expected kind." The Central Committee of German Catholics, the official representative of the laity, warned us of the difficulties of church reform. But the fact is: Over the past 30 years, both – a large proportion of the German bishops and the Central Committee have changed, had to change, their positions significantly.

But who at that time would have thought that a collection of signatures launched in Austria in 1995 would become a seedbed for a worldwide reform movement? Just a year earlier, Pope John Paul II and his Prefect of the Faith, Joseph Ratzinger, had forbidden any discussion of the ordination of women. Ratzinger intervened several times with secret letters against *Wir sind Kirche*. In 2001, he even placed all cases of sexual violence worldwide under the 'papal secret' and with the threat of excommunication. This was only lifted by Pope Francis.

Those were difficult early years for us. But we remained active and we networked. In January 1996, the Austrian and German KirchenVolksBegehren were awarded the Herbert Haag Prize for Freedom in the Church. In Germany, we formed the *KirchenVolksBewegung Wir sind Kirche* (Church People's Movement We are Church) at the beginning of 1996.

Since then we have been actively involved in all national Catholic and Protestant Church Congresses (Katholikentage and Evangelische Kirchentage). At the end of 1996 – Valerie Stroud will report on this – we founded *We are Church International* in Rome. We did a lot together with the French Bishop Jacques Gaillot from Évreux, who was punished in 1995 by the Vatican; he was effectively 'our' bishop.

Two very special activities in Germany: In the 1990s the German bishops were forced by the Vatican to withdraw from the pregnancy conflict counselling in Germany that was organized by the state. Rome would not allow abortion under no circumstances. *Wir sind Kirche* helped to found the 'Frauenwürde' association, 'Women's dignity'. With 'Frauenwürde', Catholic women and men set up their own counselling network and have been running it ever since.

The second important activity: long before the bishops, *Wir sind Kirche* operated an emergency telephone, a help line from 2002 to 2012, which provided counselling and support to more than 400 people affected by sexual violence by priests and religious.

Looking back it took far too long for the official church to really take action against sexual violence apart from episcopal guidelines. This still is very traumatic especially for those affected by sexual abuse. Up to this day, compensation and, in some dioceses, taking action against sexual violence is still unsatisfying. Some have not even begun. Guilt and malpractice are only admitted in bits and pieces. The statute of limitations is invoked or the Church declares that it is not responsible for the private lives of priests.

2010 was the 'annus horribilis' for the Church in Germany after the disclosure of physical and spiritual sexual violence at the Jesuit's College in Berlin. More and more scandals came to light. In 2011 the German bishops launched a 'dialogue process' (as the Austrian Bishops did).

However, this process controlled by the bishops was not really successful and ended in 2015 with great disappointment. It was not until the publication of the 'abuse study' in 2018 commissioned by the German bishops, that everyone was shaken up.

The bishops now felt compelled to ask the 'laity', the *Central Committee of German Catholics* for help. With joint responsibility, they launched the 'Synodal Path', which is not a synod under canon law. It is a novelty, some say a nullity. This is because its deliberations are not yet binding. *Wir sind Kirche* is closely following this highly exciting process, which was launched at the end of 2019 and will end in 2026, but on purpose we do not actively participate in it.

'Synodal Path' in Germany and World Synod: The 'Synodal Path' comprises the four subject areas 'Power and Separation of Powers in the Church', 'Sexuality and Partnership', 'Priestly Existence Today' and 'Women in Ministries and Offices in the Church'. These areas were recognised by the German abuse study as **the** risk factors for 'abuse' and cover-ups.

They are precisely the topics that – one could say prophetically – were formulated in 1995 by *Wir sind Kirche* in Austria in response to the abuse scandal in Vienna. These topics have also crystallised as important pastoral issues in the global synodal process that was initiated by Pope Francis in 2021. This became clear at the two assemblies of the World Synod in 2023 and 2024. At these assemblies women were also able to participate in counselling and decision-making for the first time. This can be seen as a hopeful development in our church. *We are Church International* closely followed these world synods in Rome.

Opposing developments: But in our church we still suffer from oppressive clerical power structures. Victims of abuse, women and queer people in particular still experience discrimination within the Roman Catholic Church.

In addition, relativizing the reform steps of the Second Vatican Council John Paul II and Benedict strengthened the influence of neo- conservative and ultra-conservative forces in the church. The growing currents of supposedly Bible-believing Evangelicals and right-wing conservative Catholic circles are a cause for great concern. They are also closely networked with right-wing political forces. The statements made by US Vice President JD Vance, who converted to Catholicism, and the hype surrounding the murdered US influencer Charlie Kirk are just two highly alarming examples. Our faith and the churches are challenged in the face of this new destructive ZEITGEIST around the world. This fundamentally contradicts the message of Jesus.

Pope Francis: The urgently needed turnaround came in March 2013 with the election of Pope Francis. He has taken up and continued the reform impulses of the Council in many large and small steps. Despite all the resistance, particularly in the Vatican, in twelve years he has changed the Roman Catholic

Church more fundamentally than many had expected. With the worldwide participation of the church base in synods and with the right to vote not only for bishops, Pope Francis has initiated a turning point in the history of the church that has raised great hopes and expectations. This can not be reversed. Pope Francis' rediscovery of synodality and subsidiarity are also strong prophetic signs. They are ways of acting in the face of the dangerous growth of autocratic systems of power in the political world.

Pope Leo XIV: After his election, Pope Leo immediately promised to continue the reform process initiated by Pope Francis. Expectations of him are high, but some of his previous statements have also irritated us. However, this and the neo-conservative and ultra-conservative forces should not discourage us. Let us support Pope Leo so that the church succeeds in tackling the upcoming decisions in a synodal manner. Above all, the local churches have now to become active. Unfortunately, despite the mandate of the final paper of the World Synod, up to today too little is happening – also in Germany.

Networking in Germany: In Germany, *Wir sind Kirche* has therefore networked closely with reform-oriented Catholic associations, initiatives and new reform groups that have emerged in recent years, such as *Maria 2.0*, *Out in Church*, *Religious Women for Human Dignity* and parish initiatives and priest initiatives.

Strategic hope: For Pope Leo to be a successful pontiff, a real 'bridge builder', he will have to incorporate the reform Catholic 'bridge pillar' which is based on the Second Vatican Council and to incorporate it into all processes and debates. The fact that representatives of *We Are Church International* will be attending the synod meeting in Rome in October at the invitation of the Vatican is an absolute first. The meeting is called 'Jubilee of the Synodal Teams'.

We will not give up our strategic hope, sustainable confidence and our progressive, positive narrative. This is a task that *Wir sind Kirche / We Are Church* has been fulfilling for 30 years together with many other global reform forces. The three words 'Power / Lack of Power / Hope' is the motto of the conference to mark the 30th anniversary of *We are Church Germany* at the beginning of November this year in Nuremberg. You are all very welcome to come to join us there.

Thank you so much once again, Austria, for giving us the impetus that is now having a great impact via the Synodal Path in Germany, all the way to the World Synod and hopefully beyond!

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30 years KirchenVolksBegehren and *We are Church*: www.wir-sind-kirche.de/30jahre

Martha Heizer, Christian Weisner: Out of love for the church and in concern for it:

25 years of 'We are Church' (Stimmen der Zeit 146 (2021) 145-153)
www.herder.de/stz/hefte/archiv/146-2021/2-2021/aus-liebe-zur-kirche-und-in-sorge-um-sie-25-jahre-wir-sind-kirche/

