**The History of women’s ordination in Germany**

**Introduction**

It is difficult to give a short overview about the history of women’s ordination in Germany as there is not only one history but many histories or rather her-stories. That has to do with our church structure in general: In Germany we do not have one Protestant Church in Germany but many independent regional churches, at the moment 20 different Lutheran, united or reformed churches. The territories of the regional churches correspond in many cases to the borders of the kingdoms, dukedoms and principalities of the Napoleonic era and still remind us of the time when each dukedom or kingdom had the religion of the ruler, “cuius regio, eius religio”. When in 1871 Germany became one state, the regional churches remained independent churches, they did not create one German Protestant church. Since 1871, some of the regional churches have merged into bigger entities like my Evangelical Lutheran Church in Northern Germany which only came into being in 2012. The EKD, the Evangelical Church in Germany, is therefore rather an umbrella organisation, it has very limited possibilities of making decisions for all the protestant churches in Germany. So in Germany we do not have one decision of a synod for the ordination of women but many, not only one date but many for the first ordination of women.

1. **The first women who studied theology**

By the end of the 19th century women in Germany were allowed to pass the Abitur, that means to do the final secondary school exams which allow people to go to University. First women were only allowed as guest students, then in 1900, Baden in Southern Germany was the first country to allow women to fully matriculate as students. Only the Weimar Constitution of 1919 allowed the entry of women and men to all professions. Therefore from 1919 onwards women could pass the exams at all theological faculties. Before, you could only get a PhD or a so-called Licenciat. The first woman with a theological Licenciat was Carola Barth in Jena in 1907, the sixth was Anna Sophie Paulsen 1924 at Kiel University.

The problem was that you need to pass a church exam, not a University exam to be allowed to apply to become a pastor. In 1916, Elsbeth Overbeck was the first woman in Germany who did such a church exam. That happened – without any legal regulation - in the regional church of Baden, in other parts of Germany it had to wait up to 50 more years. In Hamburg Sophie Kunert passed a church exam in 1925 and applied for ordination in the same year. For two years the church in Hamburg discussed her application in synods and committees. In October 1927 the synod in Hamburg passed the “law concerning the use of theologically educated women”. It allowed a blessing, not an ordination of women. Parish services and the administration of the sacraments was not allowed to women.

1. **First Rules for employing women theologians in the church**

Like Hamburg, there were 11 regional churches altogether who had first legal decisions about the employment of women theologians before 1933. The united church in Prussia (“Altpreußische Union”) for example employed women theologians by making them equal to church officials but not to pastors. They were blessed, not ordained, for working with women, girls and children. They were not allowed to do parish services or funerals, baptisms and weddings. They were not allowed to marry – like the first women employed as state officials, for example teachers in higher education. They got the title “Vikarin”, not pastor.

[In 1925 the *Association of Protestant Women Theologians in Germany* (Verband Evangelischer Theologinnen Deutschlands) was founded in Marburg. It mainly campaigned for a specific function of women theologians subordinate to the pastor. In 1930 out of this Association the *Union of Protestant Women Theologians* (Vereinigung Evangelischer Theologinnen) split apart. It demanded out of ecclesiological reasons the full equality of women and men as pastors (especially Carola Barth, Annemarie Rübens, Ina Gschlössl). Many of their members lost their jobs in the beginning of the National Socialist era. Therefore the Union stopped to exist in 1933, only the Association remained.]

In the time of the Second World War many women took the place of the pastors who had to go to the army. The women worked practically like pastors and they ruled parishes. That gave them a new self-esteem. But after the war the churches tried to come back to the old rules of leaving women theologians only to work with women and children.

1. **The long way towards women’s ordination**

So after the war the situation was at its best that women theologians could be blessed, not ordained, could work in specific functions and had to remain unmarried. In some regional churches in the German Democratic Republic some women became ordained and could work as pastors, in 1974 they were allowed to get married, in 1982 the pastors’ services law in the Federation of the Protest Churches in the German Democratic Republic declared women and men pastors as fully equal.

In the West, there was an enormous difference between the regional churches in changing laws concerning the education of pastors, the title, the talar, the salary and the celibacy clause, i.e. if women pastors were allowed to get married. In 1958, when the German Bundestag adopted the Equality Act, the first three regional churches adopted laws for a restricted equality of women and men as pastors (Evangelische Kirche der Pfalz (reformed), Ev.-Luth. Kirche in Lübeck, Anhaltinische Kirche (united)). In 1959, Elisabeth Haseloff in Lübeck was the first woman to be ordained as fulltime pastor not only working for women`s work, but also in a parish. In some churches it took much longer. For example the small regional church of Eutin in Schleswig-Holstein did not adopt any law concerning women theologians before it merged into the Northelbian Church in 1977. And the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Schaumburg-Lippe only started to ordain women in 1991! The daughter of Bishop Heubach who was strictly against the ordination of women therefore became a pastor in our Northelbian Church.

[In 1978, the law concerning pastors of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany (VELKD) declared women and men as completely equal. (This law needed to be adopted by the member churches which Northelbia and Hannover soon did).

1. **The first women in leading positions in the protestant churches in Germany**

From the mid-1960s there were the first women who were called as church officials (“Oberkirchenkirchenrat”, those who work in leading positions in the church offices). Since the 1980s, more and more women were elected as rural deans, superintendents or even regional bishops. The Evangelical Church in Berlin-Brandenburg was the first to appoint with Ingrid Laudien a woman as superintendent in 1976, and as first general superintendent in 1994 (a sort of regional bishop). In 1992 Maria Jepsen was elected as first female Lutheran Bishop worldwide by the Synod of the Northelbian Church for the district of Hamburg. And in 2009, Dr Margot Käßmann, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church if Hannover, became chairperson of the EKD council, the highest position of a theologian in Germany.

1. **Everything fine?**

So all positions have meanwhile been taken by women theologians. So is everything fine in Germany? From my point of view, it is not that easy. Yes, we have women’s ordinations in all regional churches of the EKD, about one third of the pastors are women.[[1]](#footnote-1) But many of them work part time – 23.7 % of the full time pastors are women and 60.8 % of the part time pastors. In my former Northelbian Church we had at one stage two women bishops out of three bishops, the heads of both Social Service Agencies and the president of the Northelbian Synod were women. Today in my Evangelical Lutheran Church in Northern Germany one bishop of five is a women, the heads of all three Social Service Agencies and the president of the Northelbian Synod are all men. When the church council decided which 12 persons they called additionally to the synod, they called 11 men and 1 woman although there were already more men than women members. When Bishop Maria Jepsen was elected in 1992 there was a strong and loud opposition in Germany, and she was attacked for different things like the house where she lived for which men were rarely attacked. So we need to remain on the watch as the awareness of these issues is sinking. And we need to change the structures and the work load of leading positions as otherwise not many women agree to apply for leading positions. And we need to strengthen each other – like the many women in Northelbia in 1992 who made a huge carpet of blessing out of many little pieces for the newly elected Bishop Maria Jepsen. May God bless our churches and may God bless the service of women and men in our church!

Aitäh!

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1. 32.1 % women pasotrs in 2009 (From: Gezählt. Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland 2016), about 37 % women pastors, 21 % women deans, superintendents etc. and three bishops in 20 regional churches at the moment. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)