

Inaugural lecture of Prof. Dr. Kleine Vennekate at the FIT Hermannsburg:

Since 01.04.2022, Professor Dr. Katharina Kleine Vennekate has held the chair of Practical Theology with a focus on diakonia in an intercultural perspective at the University of Applied Sciences for Intercultural Theology Hermannsburg (FIT). On Jan. 31, 2023, she delivered her inaugural lecture to FIT faculty, staff and students, as well as to family members and guests. The topic of the inaugural lecture was "People with trauma experiences as a task of intercultural pastoral care in church congregations".

The lecture topic is close to Kleine Vennekate's heart not only from an academic perspective, but also because of her personal professional background: After studying theology and ordination as a pastor as well as a doctorate on a church-historical topic at the KiHo Wuppertal / Bethel, she worked for 6 years in the counseling center of the Lippische Landeskirche as a psychotrauma counselor and held many conversations, especially with refugee women who not only lost their homes, but also suffered from traumatic experiences.

The topic of flight and integration - also of traumatized refugees - has been highly topical in Germany not only since the outbreak of the war of aggression in Ukraine in 2022. Christian congregations, and especially the international congregations, are often the first place refugees turn to for support and help. In her lecture, Kleine Vennekate elaborated on the factors that are important for a culturally and trauma-sensitive accompaniment of traumatized people in Christian, especially intercultural, congregations.

First of all, Kleine Vennekate - based on scientific findings - illuminated what trauma is and what existential mental (fear, aggression, feeling of powerlessness) or physical (sleep disorders, racing heart, restlessness, flashbacks) consequences it can trigger in those affected, including deep insecurity, loss of control and post-traumatic stress disorders. In addition to the destabilizing trauma experiences, refugees also experience the loss of their homeland and the uncertainty in the foreign host country.

According to Kleine Vennekate, resilience is a decisive factor in overcoming trauma and transforming the life-threatening experience into a positive development in the sense of "post-traumatic growth." Resilience is defined by developmental psychologists as "the maintenance and restoration of previous levels of psychological adjustment and functioning after trauma has occurred or in the face of existing limitations and losses." Various internal and external factors can positively (promote) or even negatively (jeopardize) influence the emergence of resilience.

Kleine Vennekate cited religiousness and spirituality as examples of internal, personal factors - in addition to a positive self-concept, goal orientation and social competence on the part of the refugee. Faith, she said, can be an important tool for giving meaning to the fate suffered and/or experiencing protection in an unprotected situation. "Faith can help accept the unchangeable," Kleine Vennekate said. Culturally and trauma-sensitive pastoral care must strengthen these personal factors to stabilize the traumatized person, she said.

According to Kleine Vennekate, external factors can also have a resilience-promoting effect. Thus, the task and goal of culturally and trauma-sensitive pastoral care must be to support those affected in their search for inner security. The Bible offers great potential for putting into words what people have experienced: Anger, grief, despair, cohesion, confidence, hope and forgiveness. Responding to the language and culture of the person or persons affected supports the feeling of security and safety. To overcome powerlessness and promote self-efficacy for those affected, "communities should consider how to give refugees space and resources to engage in their own activities and projects that allow them to become involved in community life." Belonging to a community, especially Christian congregations, can also have a stabilizing effect, he said. And finally, refugees need support in adapting to their new living environment with a different culture, a different language and a different social order. Here, too, Christian congregations are already providing help in many ways, for example by providing information, spiritual support, assistance in finding housing, supplying clothing or exchanging ideas with other refugees.

In summary, Kleine Vennekate stated, "Christian intercultural congregations have great potential to support refugees with traumatic experiences and foster their resilience." In her lecture, she developed several very concrete approaches to culturally and trauma sensitive pastoral care. In the absence of empirical data, she based her remarks on scientific literature and accounts of refugees from her previous counseling work. While it has been scientifically proven that faith in God can help people with traumatic experiences to stabilize themselves, what has not been researched so far - Kleine Vennekate said - is how faith in God and how Christian congregations in Germany can help refugees cope with their traumatic experiences and find their way into German society. Based on this, Kleine Vennekate suggested an empirical study on the approaches presented as well as the development of an advanced training program for culturally and trauma-sensitive pastoral care.

The lecture was followed by a lively discussion, in which the predominantly international students of FIT also participated. Some of them reported that trauma-sensitive pastoral care is hardly discussed in the congregations in their home countries, let alone implemented professionally.

So there is a need for action not only in Germany.