Church Communities in the Future: Church Without a Home

In the north of Baden-Württemberg lies Bad Friedrichshall, a former mining and salt producing community. The city's youngest district, Plattenwald, started life as a housing development for late repatriates. The new quarter was situated between the large hospital in the southwest of Bad Friedrichshall and the town of Amorbach, a part of the city of Neckarsulm with its large *Audi* automobile plant. The district formed a link in this industrial region, providing housing close to the workplace for many new citizens who came to Germany in the 80s and 90s. What makes this district interesting for this book is that it compares well to Ziehers North and Neuhof-Ellers where families built their first homes in the 1960s. But Plattenwald is also different in one crucial aspect, it is a heterogenous quarter: the 3,000 inhabitants stem from 55 nations, housing ranges from large apartment complexes in the middle, to semi-detached and single houses which form a ring around the centre. Such a history and heterogenity also mean that no unifying religious building project appeared in the community, its central square occupied by a single high-rise block that houses the administration and not a large church.

In this area the question how church can help to "let the other come to life" takes on a new significance as there is no established community or church building on which to build. Instead we are thrown back to the place and its demands. If a spatially and materially sensitive practical theology must prove itself in one place, then it is a quarter like Plattenwald. I want to sketch out how we could meet the demands of that place as practical theologians and propose a research project that applies what this book has brought together in theory. In my design, I want to focus on one particular aspect where theology is needed, namely community-building.

Figure 42: Overview map of Plattenwald in Open Street Map.

OpenStreetMap data is available under the Open Database Licence: open-streetmap.org/copyright.

Modern neighbourhoods are increasingly segregated, especially in-between cities, or hybrid-cities[1] on the border between rural and city structures. While the living quarters are mixed, the inhabitants seldom meet as their workplaces and the places where they spend their leisure time are not in the vicinity of their homes. With an increased mobility came the loss of importance of the local spaces (cf. Burfeind 2018). This has also consequences for local involvement, which increasingly becomes transitory and informal (cf. Alscher et al. 2009, pp. 34, 55) and, more importantly, no longer incorporates a wide range of people from different ends of the social and cultural spectrum, as the traditional local citizens' associations did (cf. Noack and Schmidt 2014). What is missing is a common local narrative,[2] a physical and metaphorical space around which people gather, much like the church and the building association in the Catholic quarters in the 1960s, because social practice, as

---

1   The terminology was introduced by Thomas Sieverts (Sieverts 1997). For a critique on the undefined-ness of the term cf. Hesse (Hesse 2004, p. 71).

2   Of course, there are large-scale narratives, such as "home country" or "nation," which can potentially unite citizens, but these container narratives first of all suggest a homogeneity which they cannot redeem in practice and they are often used to exclude groups of people (cf. Ekué et al. 2017, p. 163).

Miggelbrink argues, hinges on the process of giving symbolic meaning to the world around us (cf. Miggelbrink 2002, p. 45).

My suggestion on how to foster social cohesion reverses the process that established religious communities usually follow. Instead of starting with a close-knit community that slowly discovers the world around it, the citizens of Plattenwald discover their lifeworld, find common places in the physical world, and on that basis develop a common language. The end result is then not the establishment of a Catholic parish. What Michael Schüßler made the church take to heart also applies to practical theologians who are willing to expose themselves to the situation in Plattenwald:

> Spiritually, what will matter for the church is trusting an event in the traces of the gospel, wherever it happens. And even when no new parish member is won and one does not know whether the story with God is begun, continued, or disrupted. [...] One must not restrict God's presence to those spaces where he is explicitly named or emphatically believed in* (Schüßler 2014, p. 43).

Starting a concretisation of my practical theological approach in the district of Plattenwald could be understood as a radicalisation of that trust

(a) in the gospel mandate for seeking "the peace and prosperity of the city" (Jer 29:1) which is part of a larger discourse archive of Christianity and its discourses on hospitality
(b) in the experience of ecumenical and interreligious theology, which sought to establish common places between churches and religions, e.g. in the design of common places of worship and encounter
(c) in the liberating option of practical theology to enable people to take matters into their own hands, such as community organising
(d) in the "power of wonder" (cf. page 83) with which practical theology can approach places and find new meaning.

All these aspects make practical theology suited to find new perspectives even in a place without a church, or, with Christoph Theobald, we could find "faith where we do not expect it"* (Theobald 2018, p. 75). We could find themes and topics in the existential search for meaning and community that resonate not only with our experiences as theologians but with the gospel story and the dis-

course archive of the church as well. I do not want to go into detail in this final chapter, firstly because others have written much more profoundly on the theory of such resonances (cf. e.g. Kläden and Schüßler 2017; Koll and Friedrichs 2018; Hörsch and Pompe 2019) and secondly because before resonances happen, we need an attentiveness for the space and its people, which is the topic of this book.

Theologians do, however, need a disciplinary partner if they want to develop a sensitivity for place. This is where, besides architecture and design, which have already been mentioned above, human geography comes into play. The technique of collective mapping in particular can enable theologians to get a new perspective on their surroundings and to foster a change of perspective in others as well. Collective mapping is in essence a workshop design that brings participants of a specific part of town together to walk through their neighbourhood and create an alternative map of the area. It is based in critical geography, which argues that maps "do not represent the world [...], but visualise both natural and social phenomena"* (Bittner and Michel 2018, p. 298), which means that maps also represent power relations. Democratising map making and using it as a tool to reflect on the local situation has been used both by critical geographers (Halder et al. 2018) and citizens' grassroots organisations (Iconoclasistas 2016). As a tool it complements and (politically) concretises the idea of the flaneur described earlier and turns it from a single to a group activity.

While the critical geographer is versed in the design of mapping workshops, it is the task of the practical theologian to bring the experiences of his or her discipline into the dialogue. Leading questions could be: In what places have faith communities built visions for the future and what aspects from these places are transferable to the public realm? Where did a faith community's futuristic visions turn to stifling experiences and what are the built and material factors that contributed to this development? What liberating strategies could we take from past examples where faith communities engaged with the built environment around them and the people living therein? And lastly, and most importantly, are there questions that have not been asked in the dialogue with the built environment, especially questions of human freedom and the role of the built environment as an actor that contributes to that – or that subjugates people by design?