

Lecture by Bishop Dr Dr h.c. Dröge

Evangelical Church Berlin-Brandenburg-Silesian Upper Lusatia (EKBO)

**12th Assembly of the European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN) –
Meeting in Katowice, Poland, on 7 October 2018**

**Topic: Contribution of the Church to Discussing the Closure of Coal Mines in
Germany**

I.

At the beginning of June 2018, the German Federal Government established the “Commission for Growth, Structural Change and Employment”, abbreviated as “Coal Commission”. The commission is expected to find a phase-out date and a socially acceptable transition as far as coal-fired electricity production is concerned. This matter particularly affects the people in Lusatia, the coal-mining region of my regional church. We all know how harmful lignite-fired electricity production is and that it has to be stopt as soon as possible. Only then will we be able to fulfil the obligations we have entered into by signing the Paris Agreement that was approved in December 2015. With the new Commission Germany now has the great opportunity to realise an exit strategy. But even now contrasting positions increasingly emerge. Whereas some are pushing for withdrawing from coal mining as quickly as possible, others insist that this will be absolutely impossible in the near future. It is argued that there will be a threat of supply shortages. There is a fear of unaffordable electricity prices for the socially weaker.

It is uncertain whether the work of the coal commission will achieve a result. Therefore two weeks ago the board of my church made an appeal to the members of the commission on 22 September 2018: “Do not abandon your efforts to find an agreeable solution to successfully realise the withdrawal from coal-

mining together with initiating the necessary structural change as soon as possible!”

Considering the current stage of debate in my country, we try to make the climate problem aware in the public, for example by our participating in the Third Ecumenical Pilgrim Path for Climate Justice. Since 9 September, pilgrims, starting in Bonn (the location of the 2017 United Nations Climate Change Conference, “COP23”), have been going on foot to Katowice (the location of the 2018 United Nations Climate Change Conference, “COP24”). They expect to arrive at Katowice on 9 December 2018, exactly when the conference will be opened. I am pleased to have become patron of this pilgrim path. The motto of the Pilgrim Path is: “Geht doch!” In German this has two meanings: “Go!” and “It is possible!”. People of different denominations combine their joy of going on pilgrimage with the commitment to climate justice and climate protection. For one thing is clear: The path towards more justice in the treatment of God's creation will certainly not be a relaxed trip.

II.

Now, I would like to tell you about our pilgrim path towards the integrity of creation which we have started in the EKBO many years ago.

As the bishop of this regional church I am also the bishop of a large part of the Lusatia coal deposits. They are situated in the south of Brandenburg and in the northeast of Saxony. It is the second largest coal-mining area of Germany, only being exceeded by the Rhenish coal-mining area, where we actually have the demonstrations in the Hambacher Forst. In 2016, about 170 million tons of coal were produced throughout Germany. A third of this production comes from Lusatia. 90 percent of the total lignite output of Germany was converted into electricity. What we do know for certain today is that lignite can theoretically be mined for at least another 200 years. What we also do know for certain is that

this shall on no account be practically implemented if Germany wants to achieve its agreed climate protection goals.

The lignite of Lusatia was formed 15 to 20 million years ago. In 1789, the first coal seam was started to be worked. In 1890, surface mining began. The Lusatian textile and glass industry's requirement for energy was constantly growing. In 1924, the world's first overburden conveyor gantry was put into operation. It was thus possible to produce lignite in great quantities. In 1989, at the end of the GDR area, some 115,000 people still worked in the Lusatian coal production. Today, there are about 8,500, 40 percent of them being at least 50 years old. The German Lignite Industry Association reports that coal employs some 20,900 people throughout Germany. In the field of renewable energies, the number of employees meanwhile has risen to about 330,000. Since lignite-mining began in Lusatia, some 25 billion tons have been produced and have been burnt almost exclusively. With regard to Lusatian coal, it can be concluded that the burning process of one ton of coal releases nearly one ton of carbon dioxide.

Apart from the mining and burning of lignite, there are many more problems involved. I would like to mention some important ones.

In order to produce coal by opencast mining in Lusatia, groundwater has to be lowered to a depth of 150 metres. This process has considerable effects on the flora, fauna and surface water. The intensive coal production leaves large “residual holes”. They are intended to become lakeland. In turn, this measure requires huge amounts of water.

Lusatia has traditionally been characterised by agriculture and forestry. The huge area needed for surface mining has significantly diminished this agricultural and forest land. Recultivation measures are necessary. The future will tell whether this is to succeed. This process will fundamentally change the soil, flora and fauna.

Since 1924, surface mining has meant that 136 villages had to be removed so far, while nearly 25,000 people lost their home. By using two examples, I would like to make clear to you what this can mean for every single person.

In the small village of Horno, the last building was vacated in 2005. Subsequently, the whole village was demolished. The 500-year-old village church had been blown up on 26 November 2004. Only the altar and the tower hood found their place in the newly built church of the new village Neu-Horno (near Forst¹).

The majority of the people moved to the new district in Forst, others to Cottbus. Everyone wanting to build a new house for himself got compensation payment. The old village Horno was located on a hill. Today, there is a 30-metre deep hole in that place. The village inhabitants and the then mayor were refusing to accept their fate for 10 years. Finally, they moved to Neu-Horno.

However, there is another story to be told. About the woman who controls the largest machine in the world. It is the *Overburden Conveyor Bridge F60* that exposes the coal seam which is a few metres thick in order to start mining coal. This woman is grateful for her good professional training and for a mining work being paid very well that is otherwise hardly to be found in the region. She is proud to contribute to the third largest power plant in Germany providing 6 million households with electricity. Yes, she is aware of the threat to the climate; and yes, she also knows that homeland is vanishing, her homeland too. For her village is planned to be demolished as well. However, the longstanding threat posed by the conveyor bridge is increasingly hardly to bear. Meanwhile, she strongly hopes that the conveyor bridge will actually come. Only if their village is demolished, a financial compensation will be granted to the inhabitants. Some people, including family members of hers, just want to leave, others want to struggle against the appearance of the conveyor bridge. And not to forget about

¹ Forst (Lausitz), Lower Sorbian: Baršć (Lužyca); 19,000 inhabitants.

her old mother who suffers since she is strongly associated with the Sorbian tradition. With each day the conveyor bridge continues to work, she loses a piece of Sorbian settlement area and Sorbian homeland.

In view of this situation, we as the Church see a triple task:

1. We promote the earliest possible withdrawal from coal production in order to protect creation.
2. This presupposes that the economic structural change will be firmly initiated. Therefore, we support the social discourse for the structural change.
3. Within our own church, we advocate ecologically friendly behaviour, for only then we are credible.

III.

How do we concretely attempt to complete this triple task?

1. The first task: Public statements in favour of the withdrawal from coal mining

The Basic Order of the Evangelical Church Berlin-Brandenburg-Silesian Upper Lusatia (EKBO) says: “The EKBO stands up for justice, peace and protection of creation (cf. Basic Order I.11. as well as Art. 10, 15, 68). This is not a new focus for the church work of our regional church, because already during the GDR era especially church groups insistently advocated the protection of creation and campaigned against new surface mining areas.

From 2007 till 2009, there was a working group of the Church Board dealing with the topic “lignite”. In May 2009, a compromise was agreed, resulting in the Regional Synod's decision “Einstieg in den Ausstieg aus der

Braunkohleverstromung” (“Entry into the Exit of the coal-fired electricity production”). This decision includes an appeal to renounce developing new lignite surface mining areas, to renounce removing further villages and to also renounce building new lignite-fired power stations. The decision comprises the necessity of a socially acceptable withdrawal as well.

We have stuck to this line in our public statements since 2009.

2. The second task: Committing ourselves to the structural change

As the Regional Synod of the EKBO has professed the entry into the exit from lignite mining, our church sees its responsibility to contribute to the success of the structural change as much as possible.

Last year we established the “Centre for Dialogue and Change” in Lusatia, initiated by the Regional Synod's decision in autumn 2016. It is a much-noticed contribution of our church to the socially acceptable change.

The concept of the “Centre for Dialogue and Change“ says:

The measures offered by the Church have six various aspects:

- a) **spiritual** aspects reflected by numerous church services and devotions as well as regular liturgical intercessions,
- b) **pastoral** aspects relating to accompanying and supporting affected persons,
- c) **advisory** aspects referring to congregations and church districts, for example in the case of public planning and participation procedures,
- d) **educational** aspects, for example as community events dealing with environmental and sustainability issues, environment camps of

the Regional Youth Convention and a church congress - the so-called Lusatia Church Congress - we held in June 2015,

- e) **a view to ethnic diversity** accompanying and promoting Christian Sorbian-Wendish identity,
- f) **numerous discussions** of church representatives with interlocutors from environment initiatives and associations, with representatives of the coal and energy industry as well as political actors of the concerned German states, districts and municipalities.

The target prospects of our centre can be described by the following key points:

- promoting the social dialogue in order to support the understanding between various actors for the future of Lusatia,
- determining the growth potential of the region and furthering innovative action,
- forwarding active citizenship and political commitment in the region.

Since September 2017, the “Centre for Dialogue and Change” has been working in Cottbus. Its work is being financially secured by the church districts in Lusatia and the regional church for a period of 6 years.

3. The third task: Our own commitment in order to protect creation

In many ways do we ourselves attempt to contribute to the “protection of creation”:

In spring 2014, we developed an environmental approach for our church; in spring 2017, we agreed on concrete goals and measures to save energy and reduce carbon dioxide emissions by developing a climate protection concept. Consequently, we intend to reduce our carbon dioxide emissions by 15 percent compared with 2015 (round about 85,500 tons at that time) until 2020. This is a

very ambitious goal. In fact, we make every necessary effort to achieve this goal. Since 1 April 2018, three climate protection managers have intensively assisted in the implementation of climate protection measures in the congregations, church districts, church institutions and the regional church.

These managers are being funded by the regional church and through the National Climate Initiative of the Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety for three years.

In addition to the areas of mobility and procurement, respectively accounting for about 10 percent of our energy consumption, real estate offers the greatest challenge. The churches and the chapels have the largest share of that energy consumption. The sacral significance and the high demand on the preservation of historical monuments challenges the energetic renovation. Most buildings of the regional church require a climate-friendly heating adjustment.

Meanwhile, roughly 60 percent of all congregations have decided upon a “100 percent green power supplier”. We will encourage the remaining congregations to change their supplier too.

Many congregations have leased out farmland, meadow areas and forests. New leasing increasingly raises the question how sustainable and organic agriculture can be facilitated. The question whether church-owned areas shall be made available for non-fossil energy production is just as important. And there is the question whether more leased land can be provided for “newcomers in organic farming”.

I would like to give you a final example of intensified climate protection. In collaboration with “Klima-Kollekte” (Climate Collection), a church initiative for compensating unavoidable carbon dioxide emissions, we have got a new project off the ground. Due to worldwide partnerships maintained by Berlin Mission or the regional church a number of unavoidable travels by air become necessary each year. These can be compensated for by now. In that sense, corresponding

carbon dioxide emissions are calculated and paid in a ratio of 24 € (21 £, 28 \$) per ton. This money is spent on building on-site micro-biogas plants in Cuba with our church partners. By carrying out this compensation project we succeed in improving the living conditions of the people of Cuba and simultaneously operating biogas plants and thus saving carbon dioxide. During a visit to Cuba, I could sign the contract for this project together with our Cuban partners at the beginning of April. This project too is a small and further step towards more climate justice.

IV.

Please let me conclude:

In our regional church, we will continue to be aware of the Lusatian people with their different situations, fears and hopes, take them seriously and accompany them into the necessary structural change. And we will continue to demand the entry into the withdrawal from lignite-based electricity production. There are no simple and equally valid solutions. And the way into a desirable Lusatian future without lignite-based electricity generation will not be easy.

However, we will continue this pilgrim path together, trusting in God's blessing that accompanies us.

Thank you for your attention.