

Rev Dr Velda Love, Minister of Racial Justice in the United Church of Christ in the USA visits the EKBO and the EkvW

Report by Christina Biere



The third annual conference "Church and Racism" from September 16 to September 18, 2022 was attended by Dr. Velda Love from the United Church of Christ in the USA.

The UCC has a long history of work to combat racism. As early as 2003, the General Synod passed a resolution calling on the UCC to be an anti-racist church. Dr. Velda Love has been Minister for Racial Justice at UCC since 2017. She coordinates the Join the Movement process and provides resources and training to communities, including the Sacred Conversations to end Racism curriculum.

Since several regional churches have church communion with the UCC, members of the regional churches have also been taking part in the online course "Sacred Conversations to end Racism" for several years in order to become multipliers in Germany. For example, the Protestant Church Berlin-Brandenburg-Silesian Upper Lusatia and the Protestant Church of Westphalia invited Dr. Velda Love for the conference and visits to their churches in order to encourage and continue joint learning on this topic.

The annual conference, which took place in Haus Villigst in 2020 and 2021, continues to develop in its format from year to year. As early as 2021, conversations between the people of color and white people present took place separately, which made it possible for the PoC present to find strong words together for their demands on a majority white church. Among other things, empowerment rooms for PoCs and anti-racism training for white employees of the church were demanded. Since then, a network of PoC in the church - across institutions - has been meeting digitally every month

for exchange, a working group is working on educational materials for congregations in the German-speaking world, a movement has emerged across regional church boundaries.



This year, the conference began on Friday evening exclusively for people of color and was then continued on Saturday afternoon together with white people. This was an important momentum for the German anti-racist movement in the churches! "I came into the room and was overwhelmed, because I had never been in my life in a church room where there were only Black people," one participant said. "Until that day, I did not know that there were other Black theology students who were committed to an anti-racist church," said another participant. The two sentences are exemplary and make it clear how important spaces are for PoC in the churches in which they can be among themselves in order to strengthen themselves in their perspectives and experiences and which make it clear that the movement for racial justice must also start from these spaces in Germany.

With Velda Love, a church-leading pastor was present, who could give resonance for many hopes. It stands for a church in which the two highest deputy clergy are Black women and for a church that has made questions of justice its theological identity. Velda Love encouraged the participants to formulate their wishes and they did: We want a church that sees us in our strength and not as victims or in need of help. We want a Church that understands our pain, to experience racism on a daily basis, that grieves with us and keeps us going. We want a Church that is not compliant with injustice. We want a church in which we do not have to explain ourselves again and again. We want a church in which space is made and white people resign because other perspectives are needed for

the good of the community. We want a church in which the diversity of theology can stand side by side on an equal footing.





*Josephine: Before the conference, Velda Love had spoken to the State Secretary for Diversity and Antidiscrimination of the Berlin Senate Department for Justice, Diversity and Antidiscrimination, Saraya Gomis, to get an impression of the situation in Berlin.*

*After the conference, there was a discussion with the head of the Berlin Mission, Dr. Christof Theilemann, and Barbara Deml, responsible for ecumenism at the Berlin Mission, and Josephine Furian, from the SC2ER Cohort 2020. They looked back at the decolonial steps taken so far (e.g. racism-critical changes in the Mission Museum), addressed difficulties, and pointed out possible steps of the church to come to terms with and heal centuries of violence.*

*Superintendent Frank Schürer-Behrmann, Chair of the UCC Partnership Advisory Board of the EKBO, invited to a discussion with Velda Love. The topic was the spiritual and ecclesial approach to racism in church and society. Dr. Love explained that the UCC responded to the many racist murders of people of African descent, by developing and implementing the "Sacred Conversations to End Racism". These healing conversations are about developing a common language. Communities are empowered to take action against the racism that kills and to work towards healing and restorative justice. In addition to educational work, the UCC is taking the path of community organising around the "Join the Movement" campaign, a spirit-led movement towards racial justice that works with other intersectional movements that have reparations and healing at their core. Racial injustice has a global impact and so it makes sense for the white dominated German churches to connect globally to learn to advocate for healing and reparations.*

After the conference in Berlin, Velda Love took part in a discussion and meeting program in the Ev. Church of Westphalia.

In Bielefeld, Velda Love, together with Nathalie Eleyth, employee at the University of Bochum and chairwoman of the Racism Section of the EKvW, visited the Evangelical Reformed Süstergemeinde, which has broken new ground in dealing with the memorial plaques to members of the German colonial troops who committed the genocide of Herero and Nama in today's Namibia at the beginning of the 20th century. The descendants of the victims of that time are now demanding restorative justice from the Federal Government and the German churches, which were structurally linked to the colonial power and still benefit from the conditions of that time. In the field of restorative justice, the UCC has also developed programs that can be groundbreaking for churches in Germany.



In conversation with the theological vice-president Ulf Schlüter, Velda Love offered cooperation on training, further education and staff exchange in order to strengthen the coexistence of the two

churches. With the chairwoman of the UCC committee, Pastor Elga Zachau, concrete possibilities for future cooperation were discussed, e.g. at the Kirchentag 2023 in Nuremberg.

Since the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, various EkvW institutions have been on the way to addressing and reducing racism within the Church - in individual congregations, in youth work, in the Office for Social Responsibility and in the Office for Mission, Ecumenism and Church World Responsibility and in Diakonia. Employees from these institutions also met Velda Love, made clear the importance of the movement from bottom to top and from top to bottom and the fact that really every person can cooperate in their field to see, avoid and counteract discrimination. Among other things, it was agreed to work more closely together across offices in the area of anti-racism and to actively promote the further training of employees in this area.

On Wednesday, September 21, the Protestant Congregation in Bochum invited for a Workshop facilitated by Velda Love. Here, a circle of honorary and full-time officials came together once again, who are on the way to reducing racism in the Church in various contexts. After the event, Father Constantin Decker, together with his colleague from the English-speaking Christian Congregation (ECC), Father Emmanuel Mote-Ndasah, extended the invitation to further meetings in the congregation.



As a regional church pastor with a focus on racism and anti-racism, I was able to benefit greatly from the conversations with my colleague Velda Love and her experiences. I hope that in the coming years we as a regional church will create places of listening in order to be able to meet people with experiences of migration discrimination in our church in an atmosphere of security and trust. For this, a community of people with experiences of migration and discrimination must grow in our



church and be given opportunities for empowerment. White people in our church need education and incentives in the area of racism and whiteness. I am hopeful that the Section on Racism set up by the Synod of the EKVW will draw up appropriate proposals.

