

DER BUND Monday 27th May 2019

Helen Marshall is the first woman incumbent at the Anglican Church of St. Ursula, Berne. Her church is not simply for homesick Brits, she says.

A CHURCH IS MORE THAN A CLUB FOR KINDRED SPIRITS

When Helen Marshall followed her husband to Switzerland in October it was not yet certain that she would soon be the chaplain of the Anglican Church of St. Ursula in Berne - the first woman to hold this position. "I was out of work". Then she saw the vacancy in Berne advertised. Her husband David Marshall, also an Anglican theologian and minister, has been working for the World Council of Churches in Geneva since 2018. He commutes to Geneva and sometimes works from Berne. The chaplain receives "der Bund" in typically English rainy weather in the Church House behind the church. The church itself, built in 1906 at Jubiläumsplatz, romantically situated among trees, would be an atmospheric location for a Hitchcock film. Tea is served - with milk.

I'D LIKE TO ENCOURAGE ALL CHURCH MEMBERS TO LIVE THEIR FAITH

The church is not simply a meeting-place for homesick Brits. The congregation includes more even than members of the Commonwealth, thinks Marshall, because also nationals from China, Hongkong or the States etc. belong here. The church is "more than a club of kindred spirits". For all their differences in origin, language and confession, they are one in their faith in Christ.

Soon it will be Whitsun. This feast day commemorates the moment when the Holy Spirit filled the young christian community in Jerusalem and all was made clear. "Then we'll all have a lunch together where everyone brings along a traditional dish of their own homeland". And that should emphasise our variety, according to Revd. Marshall.

NO CLEAN BREAK

Not only does David Marshall in his job, but also Helen finds ecumenism all-important. Her congregation is "strongly ecumenical", she says. She is gradually becoming acquainted with the German language and she has already made contact with the clergy of other confessions in Berne. This is not difficult for the Anglican Church as it is somewhat "strange" in having both catholic and protestant elements. In England there was no clean break with catholicism such as drove Luther and even more so Zwingli on. Henry VIII, an out-and-out catholic thinker, solved "a personal problem", says Helen. Round about 1530 the King wanted his marriage to be annulled because his wife bore him no son and heir. The Pope refused this and so King Henry split off the Church of England with himself as head. It can be read on the church's website at the time of her installation that the chaplain asked the members of her congregation to pray for her. "I shall also pray for you". That is no meaningless phrase, but is to be taken seriously. Anyway, she did not want the church to be merely a place for social contacts but she intended to encourage all the members to live their faith. She knows how fruitful it is to spend a quiet time each morning with bible readings, meditation and prayer before rushing into the stress of the daily round. "Many people think that they have to become a Buddhist in order to achieve inner peace, and yet there are many lovely old practices in our church that offer exactly that". People need community, but also meditation.

Read the User Manual

What makes Switzerland tick? The chaplain from hilly north England has already got information about this by reading the book by British author Diccon Bewes (who chooses to live in Berne) and has taken it to heart. The book : "Swiss Watching – Inside the Land of Milk and Money", has a blurb on the cover by a former BUND editor praising it as "insightful and described with typical English humour". Helen Marshall is amazed that the Swiss voting populace has to familiarize itself several times a year with manifold issues. "At home, nobody knows even now what Brexit really means". Whatever the outcome of a deal or no deal Brexit, it could have repercussions on the recruiting of Anglican clergy. Well, we shall see, and after all this mother of two grown-up sons now still studying in England, only took up her job here in February.

Author: Markus Dütschler