

Aid to Orientation Regarding Ethical Questions Around Reproduction Medicine

Aims of the activity/of the project

Across Europe, there are diverse positions in the societal discourse on reproduction medicine. These are being influenced by varying social, cultural, political and legal contexts of European states. The aim of this project was to provide the member churches of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) with an aid to orientation, which is applicable to different societal and legal contexts. The target audience of the aid to orientation (member churches as well as individual members of the church, health care professionals, affected persons etc.) are being supplied with an instrument, which supports them in finding answers to ethical questions related to reproduction medicine on the basis of theological and ethical arguments.

Persons responsible for the project

The project was initiated by o. Univ.-Prof. Dr. DDr. h.c. Ulrich Körtner (University of Vienna, Head of the Department for Ethics and Law in Medicine; Department of Systematic Theology and the Study of Religions); he is a member of the Specialist Group on Ethics

The Specialist Group on Ethics consists of 15 representatives of CPCE members churches from all over Europe, with scientific expertise (primarily from university and extramural research institutions as well as experts from medical practice)

Cooperation partners

Contracting authority: Council of the CPCE member churches (13 representatives of member churches with different Protestant denominations). The CPCE is an association of over 100 churches and has Europe-wide several million individual members.

External experts on reproduction medicine

Project description

Church statements play an important role in debates around reproduction medicine. The church not only comments on public debates but it is also represented in national bioethics commissions (e.g. the German Ethics Council). In this context, bioethics positions within European Protestantism are inconsistent and are strongly influenced by varying social, cultural, political and legal contexts of European states. However, concrete positions regarding stem cell research, preimplantation genetic diagnosis or egg and sperm donation as well as surrogacy require clear positioning towards modern reproduction medicine.

Against this backdrop, Ulrich Körtner initiated the development of an aid to orientation regarding questions around the beginning of life at the plenary assembly of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE) in 2012. This idea corresponds thematically with a previous aid to orientation developed by the Specialist Group on Ethics regarding questions around the end of life (<http://www.leuenberg.net/press-release/protestant-churches-europe-speak-assisted-death>).

The CPCE is in charge of delivering opinions regarding social-ethical questions. At this, the Specialist Group on Ethics, appointed by the CPCE Council, gives advice. The Specialist Group is an expert panel that scientifically examines important church and political decisions and communicates the position of the church to political and civic channels.

The Specialist Group meets bi-annually to discuss the progress of the aid to orientation (project runtime: 2012-2018). In a first step, the various legal regulations of reproduction medicine in Europe (e.g. regarding egg donation, sperm donation or surrogacy) are being documented. In addition, the member churches' positions are being collected: Are there already official church statements, e.g.

in the context of legislative procedures? What are the ethical and theological arguments for certain positions? In a next step, the Specialist Group develops epistemologically guided theological arguments. These are not meant as 'default opinions' but they should rather serve as an informative and argumentative basis regarding questions around reproduction medicine.

In the development of the aid to orientation regarding questions around reproduction medicine, commissioned by the CPCE, each member of the Specialist Group has a specific assignment, such as writing certain chapters of the aid to orientation. Following the final approval by CPCE Council, the aid will be published, online and in print, in German, English and French (expected in 2017). Depending on the reception, it will also be translated into other languages.

First, the instrument is directed towards the religious public. In a further step, it is also addressed at the broader European public, amongst others via politics. In order to achieve this, representatives of EU commissions and the EU parliament are involved in consultations during the project process to introduce their expectations regarding the aid and their assessment of interim results of the project. Representatives of catholic and orthodox churches are involved in discussions on the project progress as well so as to enable a comparison of the positions of different churches.

Results/Impact

The involvement of political decision makers at national and international level as well as representatives from medical practice is ought to ensure a broad dissemination of the aid to orientation. In addition, other churches are being informed on the Protestant position.

The Specialist Group's work also impacts national societal discourses, in which the church is an important actor. For example, the interim results of the project were integrated in a statement of the Protestant church on the novella of the Austrian Reproductive Medicine Act in 2015.

Next to the aid to orientation, the project results in scientific publication, already during the process. Furthermore, new questions are generated in the church discourse, which require scientific reflection and stimulate new research projects. For example, a PhD student at the Department for Ethics and Law in Medicine at the University of Vienna, Ulrike Swoboda, conducts accompanying research to the Specialist Group's project since 2014 (Protestant Statements on Reproduction Medicine in the European Context; <http://ierm.univie.ac.at/mitarbeiterinnen/mag-ulrike-swoboda/> [only available in German]). The results of this research in turn flow back into the development of the aid to orientation.

The interlinking of work, commissioned by church committees, and the scientific research at the University of Vienna ensures that activities in the field of religion research and teaching are informed by current questions and order positions of the church and the religious public.

Quality assurance/Achievement of objectives

The Specialist Group delivers interim reports to representatives of CPCE member churches, who are not involved in the Specialist Group. These are being discussed so as to ensure ongoing adjustments of the project process.

The last chapter of the aid to orientation will include recommendations on achieving a broad dissemination and reception of the aid. Following the publication (expected in 2017), reception of the aid will be evaluated (e.g. via download rates and informal feedback of member churches). After finalization, the aid will also be analyzed in scientific publication; e.g., regarding the reception and applicability in different contexts.

Webpage/Publications

Community of Protestant Churches in Europe (CPCE): <http://www.leuenberg.net/>