

## Ecclesiastical cemeteries in northern Frisia

### The current situation and measures

Ladies and Gentlemen,

dear colleagues,

first of all, I would like to apologize for my bad pronunciation. The last time I had to hold a presentation in English, I was still going to school. But I do hope, that you can understand me in spite of that.

In Germany there are over 25.000 (twenty-five-thousand) cemeteries. The legal general conditions for operating are set by the (federal) states individually. That means, that we have 16 (sixteen) different burial laws. However - they remain similar overall.

In the area of *Nordkirche* (that's us), we have to work with 3 (three) different state laws: those of Hamburg, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Schleswig-Holstein. The cemetery system falls into the range of public safety and order, as well as into the services of general interest.

Important goals are the prevention of outspreads of illnesses and providing places for a dignified burial. On top of that, cemeteries should serve as a place to mourn and remember. Besides that, they're visible marks of the local cultures and may also be used as local recreation areas.

Ever since the 80s (eighties) burial culture has been changing. Inconspicuously but sustainably. A 'classic' burial does not seem so necessary anymore. There is a definite trend towards graves, that are small and easy to maintain. This applies especially to rural regions, where younger people tend to move away due to a lack of jobs. In addition to that, their connection to the church subsides.

The financial aspect is also of great importance. Up until 2004 the statutory health insurance offered a grant to the funeral expenses. Originally that once was about 1.000 (one thousand) EURO. Statistics show, that the trend to choose cheaper forms of burials increased even more after that.

Summarized the consequences look like this: There are less coffin burials, urn burials make up to 80% (eighty) of all the burials. In Northern Frisia on Eiderstedt it even goes as far as 90% (ninety). Sea burials and those in forests have been added and are increasing in popularity as well. In 2015 the city of Bremen was the first to allow the scattering of the ashes. This option will probably also be available in all states in the next following years.

Now to the general conditions: Basically, all cemeteries should be able to carry themselves through their own fee incomes. The fees should be calculated in such a way, that there's neither a deficit nor an excess. That is the so-called cost recovery principle. Besides, it is not permitted to calculate the fees of a cemetery complex as a whole. One has to differentiate between the varying types of graves.

Compared to municipal cemeteries, ecclesiastical cemeteries have one disadvantage: They are not allowed to use tax funds to cover their deficits. The reason being, that cemeteries are open and assessable to the public. Otherwise the church tax revenue would also benefit those, who are not members of the protestant church.

There's also the problem of maintaining all those areas on the cemeteries, that are no longer needed for burials. Part of those areas is not allowed to be part of the calculations as well. For Northern Frisia this applies for about 50% of the area.

Another reason, why the income of most cemeteries is unsatisfactory is, that the carriers of the cemeteries are obliged to form reserves for the entire rest period from the fee income. For example: if one were to rent a grave for 25 (twenty five) years, only 1/25 (one twenty fifth) can be used as income for the budget (household). In addition to that there are a lot of cemeteries, which are already in debt from the years before.

Since funeral services are considered tasks of the state in Germany and ecclesiastical cemeteries are functioning as a replacement for municipal ones, there are some federal states where there's a legal requirement that the municipalities must participate in compensating for the deficits. However, the amount is not specified. And this also only applies when there's no municipal cemeteries around.

Now I want to focus on the cemeteries which lie in the area of Nordkirche. All in all that encompasses over 1.400 (one thousand and four hundred) cemeteries, most of which, especially the small ones, are in Mecklenburg. In Schleswig Holstein (*Slesvig Holstein auf Dänisch*) there are 437 (four hundred and thirty-seven).

Those located in Northern Frisia are part of these. Here we have 85 (eighty-five) cemeteries, with about 100 ha (one hundred hectare) of land. In addition to that there are 5 municipal, 3 catholic and one Jewish cemetery. It shows that, traditionally, the cemeteries in Northern Frisia have been run by the protestant church. It's the church that takes on the tasks of a security facility and offers services of general interest at the community level.

Unfortunately, our main problem with maintaining the cemeteries also lies within financing. The reasons for this are the same I mentioned earlier. The church in Northern Frisia has now been the first in Germany to make use of the provisions of the Funeral Act for co-financing by the municipalities in a widespread manner. Starting in 2012 (Two thousand twelve), co-financing agreements were signed with the municipalities to offset the losses. Nowadays there are 55 (fifty-five) such co-financing agreements with a total of 103 (one hundred and three) municipalities. In some cases, up to 7 municipalities have jointly committed to compensate for deficits for one cemetery. The special thing about these contracts is that full deficit compensation has been agreed upon in all contracts, although the law leaves the amount of participation open.

There are three imaginable scenarios for the future for Northern Frisia:

1. Closing the cemeteries or handing them over to the municipalities.
2. Entering into co-financing agreements with the remaining municipalities (fewer than 20 (twenty) are still missing) and the establishment of joint cemetery committees with equal representation for support and control.
3. Or, as a third alternative, the transfer of the cemeteries to the church district's **Friedhofswerk**, where there are also cemetery committees with equal representation, so that the municipalities have the opportunity to decide how their grants are used.

In Northern Frisia, 38 (thirty-eight) parishes have now decided to transfer their cemeteries to the church district. The condition for this was the establishment of the Northern Frisian **Friedhofswerk** on April 1, 2017 (on the first of April in two-thousand seventeen).

The aim is to reduce costs by bundling the cemeteries into one large operation. Uniform management, uniform fees and uniform operating standards are supposed to help.

The cemetery development planning for the cemeteries is coordinated. Personnel and machine use are coordinated. This does not only serve to reduce costs; the use of machines in small cemeteries also benefits the health of employees.

Ultimately, traders and customers alike benefit from this procedure. They will always be met with technically competent contact persons and all that within set opening hours that smaller cemeteries could not offer before.

In the end, it can be said that after about three years of operation by the **Friedhofswerk**, these goals have already been partially achieved and otherwise can be achieved in the next few years. We have also noticed more and more inquiries coming from all over Germany, which indicates that other cemetery operators think our model is very interesting.

Now that is it for today, thank you for your attention!