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The Protestant Church in East Germany

by Sara Lieb
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Introduction

In 1996, I spent four months studying in what was formerly East Berlin. During that time, I met people from across the United States as well as Germany. I made many friends who are either agnostic or atheist. The reasons for these beliefs among Americans were most often based on negative experiences with a church, anger towards God because of various tragedies, or on a misunderstanding of Christianity. In my conversations with citizens of the former East Germany, I discovered that their communist beliefs did not allow them room for loyalty to the Church or even to God; as one acquaintance told me, "I am a Communist. I believe in *me*." It was through conversation with such individuals that I began to see the vital need for change in the Church. In Germany, members of churches are usually over 50. In the U.S., "non-denominational" churches are attempting to attract college students by modifying their programs to fit students' lifestyles; but there is also a lot of resentment toward these churches, making "Christian" seem like a dirty word. I discovered that many similar efforts to make the church "youth-friendly" have been made in Germany and throughout Europe, receiving mixed reactions.

In order to discern the reasons behind low church attendance in Germany today, I decided to look back at the Church's history. Because communist rule obviously had a great effect on the Church, I began in 1945 and traced its development from there. Important elements in this study include the role of the church in communist society, and the benefits Christians and all citizens of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) enjoyed because of the church's presence in society. The role of the *Kirchenbund* (a union of Protestant churches) in the unification of the churches and their members was a vital one, and its facets and role in society are addressed here. Finally, the after-effects of

the communist regime and the current role of the Church in reunited Germany are examined, in particular current concerns about declining church attendance, especially among young people.

The Protestant Church in East Germany, 1945-1989

When the Soviet Union took control of the eastern third of Germany in 1945, the churches in the area under Soviet rule were suddenly faced with great hostility and oppression. In spite of the government's attempts to overthrow the Church, however, it continued not only to exist, but to play an active role in socialist society which eventually led to the peaceful reunification of Germany.

Historical Context

Germany's unconditional surrender in May 1945 marked the end of the unified German state. Germany's economy was largely destroyed, and the postwar period is often referred to as "zero hour," the low point from which everything had to be rebuilt. All authority went to the Allied powers, and the Americans, British, French, and Soviets divided Germany into four zones. The Soviet sector encompassed the eastern third of the country. The Allied Control Council was to have joint authority over all four sectors. The Soviets, in turn, placed all German territories east of the Oder and Neisse rivers under the control of the Soviet Union and Poland as compensation for wartime losses. The Western Allies did not object to these actions, because they were under the impression that such divisions of territory were not to become permanent arrangements. However, due to "irreconcilable differences" among the Allied powers, the peace conference that would have determined the final arrangements never took place. The Allies had at first agreed to compensate the Soviet Union for damage done during the war, but became angered by Soviet

seizures of German factories and by their current lack of production for the rest of Germany (Britannica 125).

In the years immediately following the war, two sharply contrasting economic and social systems developed. The areas controlled by the Western Allies developed a western market economy and a free and pluralistic press. The Western authorities strove to fairly distribute punishment for involvement in the Nazi regime, imposing fewer penalties on those who were not as deeply involved. The Soviets, on the other hand, punished everyone without an effort to determine “degrees of complicity”. The press and other forms of communication faced stricter and more impeding censorship by the Soviet authorities. Industries were suddenly nationalized without warning or monetary compensation to the former owners; large estates were seized by the government and the land divided among small farmers (Britannica 125).

In the summer of 1945, the occupation authorities in both the eastern and western zones permitted the Germans to form political parties. Two major parties from the Weimar era reemerged in the eastern sector: the moderate Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the German Communist Party (KPD), which was loyal to the Soviet Union. In April 1946 the leaders of the SPD agreed to merge with the KPD, resulting in the Socialist Unity Party (SED). Soon afterward, authorities approved the formation of “Länder,” self-administered regions or states. By 1947, Länder in the western zones had freely elected parliamentary assemblies (Britannica 125).

In the spring of 1948, the Western powers offered American economic aid to their occupation zones. Such aid had begun in other areas of Europe a year earlier under the Marshall Plan. They also implemented a currency reform, which angered the Soviets because it was done without their approval (Britannica 126). In June 1948, the Soviets blockaded the western sectors

of Berlin. They blocked railways, highways and canals vital to the transportation of food, fuel, and raw materials for factories. The attempt to paralyze West Berlin was thwarted, however, when the Western powers organized a 24-hour airlift. Instead of halting political integration of the western zones, the Berlin blockade accelerated it. In May 1949 the Federal Republic of Germany was created in the western region (126).

The Soviet zone held a “so-called election” for the People’s Congress in May 1949, in which voters could only approve or reject “unity lists” of candidates. In October 1949, the constitution ratified by the People’s Congress was implemented in the Soviet zone, and it became the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The People’s Congress was renamed the People’s Chamber, and Wilhelm Pieck of the SED became president of the GDR on Oct. 11, 1949. Although the constitution set up the GDR as a parliamentary democracy, the SED and its leader, Walter Ulbricht, held all decision-making power. “In East Germany . . . the government served merely as the agent of an all-powerful communist-controlled party” (Britannica 126-127).

The 1950s saw a great increase in the economic gap between East and West. The Soviet authorities focused on the building of a viable economy, which resulted in the exploitation of East German citizens, thus increasing citizens’ dissatisfaction. Centralized control of a planned economy was used to “invest heavily in the construction of basic industries at the expense of production of consumer goods” (Britannica 127). Much of this productive capacity was used for Soviet war reparations. The standard of living in the GDR was much lower than that in the West; for example, food rationing continued in the East long after it had ended in the West. As a result of the material hardships, forced ideological indoctrination, repression of dissent and deviant ideas, and harassment of churches by the atheistic regime, thousands fled to the West each year. In 1952 East Germany closed off its borders with West Germany, but citizens

continued to leave through Berlin, where it was still possible to move among the four sectors and escape to the West (127).

Growing discontent with the SED led to popular protest. On June 17, 1953, workers in East Berlin went on strike to protest increased production quotas. This event was followed by a wave of government retribution (Britannica 127). However, in response to protests, Stalin's successors began to improve the status of the GDR. In 1954 reparations to the Soviet Union were stopped, and Moscow declared East Germany a sovereign state (127). In 1955 East Germany became a charter member of the Warsaw Pact, the Soviets' military alliance. The SED relaxed ideological control on artistic and intellectual activities and increased the production of consumer goods. Pressure on farmers to enter collective farms was lifted, and agricultural yields improved. Food rationing was ended in 1958 (127).

In the 1960s, however, the government returned to its repressive policies and again pushed for "the collectivization of agriculture and investment in heavy industry at the expense of consumer goods" (Britannica 128). The number of refugees through Berlin increased dramatically in 1961, bringing the total who had fled since the war to three million. On August 13, 1961, the East German government sealed off East Berlin from the West. They did this first with barbed wire, and later constructed a concrete wall through the middle of the city, enclosing West Berlin. From then on, official permission was required to cross, and it was almost never granted. Border guards were instructed to shoot to kill if necessary "to prevent the crime of 'flight from the republic'" (128). With this action, the SED was able to stabilize the East German economy, and it became the most prosperous territory under Soviet control. However, the GDR remained far behind the West in the quantity and quality of its consumer goods (128).

In 1960, President Pieck (of the GDR) had died and was replaced by Ulbricht. In 1968, Ulbricht imposed a new constitution “that sharply curtailed civil and political rights” (Britannica 128).

Meanwhile, in West Germany, the Social Democrats gained much influence and won the presidency of their candidate Gustav Heinemann in 1969, resulting in the first “full-scale change of government” for the West (Britannica 128). The greatest impact of this administration was the change in the Federal Republic’s relations with East Germany and the other communist-ruled countries of Eastern Europe with the formation of its new *Ostpolitik*. In 1962, a paper known as the *Ostdenkschrift* had appeared which discussed the need for Germany to establish a new relationship with Poland and other nations Germany had invaded (Baum 49). Now, seven years later, the hope of this paper was to be fulfilled. Before the implementation of this new policy, the Federal Republic had refused to acknowledge the existence of the East German government (Britannica 128). In 1970, the social-liberal cabinet, along with the Soviet Union and Poland, entered treaties that required Bonn to recognize the Oder-Neisse line as the eastern boundary of Germany. This new *Ostpolitik* was denounced by the Christian Democrats in West Germany as “a surrender on points that should await settlement by peace treaty” (128). When Ulbricht at first resisted the West’s overtures to East Germany, it resulted in a withdrawal of Soviet support and led to his replacement as East German leader by Erich Honecker in 1971 (128).

As the 1970s began, East Germany enjoyed many benefits from the Basic Treaty with the Federal Republic. It had at last found international acceptance, and began to prosper as West German credit was offered and trade between the two states increased. This enabled the East to acquire valuable West German currency. The East German government began to report great

increases in productivity which, after the fall of the GDR, were found to be false. The material gap between East and West actually increased during this time (Britannica 128).

Although international recognition provided many benefits for East Germany, it also endangered the dictatorial East German government when contact with the democratic West was allowed. To stifle dissent, the government actually increased its ideological controls, especially on artists and intellectuals, who were imprisoned or even banished to the West (Britannica 129). In order to reiterate the separateness of the GDR from West Germany, the constitution was amended in 1974 to minimize the use of the word "German" and to stress the socialist nature of the East German state and its irrevocable links with the Soviet Union (129).

In West Germany, Brandt resigned in May 1974 after it was discovered that his aide was an East German spy. The Social Democrat Helmut Schmidt succeeded him as chancellor. Walter Scheel of the Free Democrats was elected federal president in 1974 (Britannica 129).

As dissent continued to grow in the GDR in the 1980s, the government and Honecker sought further recognition from the West, hoping to increase the legitimacy of the GDR (Britannica 129). Chancellor Schmidt visited the GDR in December 1981, ignoring Honecker's demand that East Germans be viewed as foreigners by the Federal Republic. After this visit, the GDR made it easier for its citizens to visit the West and began granting permission to emigrate to the West. In the 1980's thousands took advantage of this chance, though they first had to overcome "formidable bureaucratic obstacles" (129).

In 1987, Honecker was received in Bonn by Chancellor Kohl with full state honors, "seemingly confirming the West's acceptance of the permanence of the GDR" (Britannica 129). But the GDR was losing legitimacy in the eyes of its own citizens. Travel to the West did not satisfy citizens, as the government had hoped; instead, it increased discontent. In the West, GDR

citizens experienced a consumer-oriented society, higher-quality goods, freedom of expression, and an open marketplace of ideas and opinions, all of which contrasted sharply with the “rigid censorship and repression of deviant ideas at home” (129). The Wall seemed to grow ever more oppressive. Secret movements began to form, two of which were an ecological organization protesting outdated industries, and an underground peace movement against the regime’s “manipulation of the cause of peace for propaganda purposes” (129). Both of these were sheltered by churches in the predominantly Protestant GDR.

The surprisingly fast collapse of the GDR was triggered by the breakdown of the communist regimes elsewhere in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. In 1988 the Honecker regime forbid the circulation of “Soviet publications it viewed as dangerously subversive” (Britannica 129). In 1989 the Hungarian government allowed East Germans to cross to the West through its recently opened border with Austria. Mass demonstrations demanding reform took place in East German cities, most notably Leipzig (129).

Panicking, the SED Politburo replaced Honecker in mid-October 1989 with Egon Krenz. On the evening of November 9, communist authorities announced new travel regulations that would enable those in the East to travel directly to the West with official permission. This was “widely [mis]interpreted as decision to open the Berlin Wall” (Britannica 129). Mobs of people demanded to enter Berlin, and the border guards, unprepared for such crowds, let them go.

The opening of the Berlin Wall was the fatal blow for the GDR. In Mid-November Krenz was replaced by Hans Modrow, who promised free, multi-party elections. In the vote of March 1990, the SED was overwhelmingly defeated. The largest party in the People’s Chamber turned out to be the eastern counterpart of Kohl’s Christian Democratic Union (Britannica 130). The government began to negotiate a treaty of unification. The mass of refugees from the East

“added urgency to those negotiations” (130). The flow of refugees slowed in July 1990, when a monetary union of the two Germanies was created. That same month, Kohl asked Gorbachev to drop objections to a unified Germany in the NATO alliance in exchange for West German financial aid to the Soviet Union. The unification treaty was ratified in September and went into effect Oct. 3, 1990. The GDR joined the Federal Republic as five additional Länder, and the two parts of Berlin became one Land (130).

Church History

After Germany was divided following World War II, the Protestant churches in East and West remained connected and met each year at the *Kirchentag*. This enabled them to make joint decisions and made the churches “the single expression of a lost German unity” (Britannica 228). In West Germany, people remained willing to pay the Church tax as a percentage of their income tax to the government, so that Church membership remained steady (although attendance was extremely low). Eighty-five percent of people in the West were “formally affiliated” with a church, compared to only 55 percent in the East (Britannica 49). However, the Protestant Church in the East had a much greater effect on the society in which it existed by serving as shelter and support for citizens who believed the existing socialism could and should be reformed.

In the years between 1945 and 1969 in the GDR, great changes took place in the Church as a result of the socialist government in which it lived. Antichurch movements were frequent, and reached their peak in the early 1950s, but by the late 1960s the government was becoming more tolerant of the Church and reformed the constitution, making the Church the only place where people could gather to freely discuss their ideas. Shortly thereafter, however, as the government experienced greater dissatisfaction among citizens of the GDR, it blamed the Church

for the people's restlessness. However, it was the Church who urged East Germans to stay and fulfill the Church's mission by serving their society in the freedom of Christ. 1969 saw the creation of the Kirchenbund, and in the 1970s relations between the government and the Church improved once again. Citizens began to see hope for reform, and formed movements within the sanctuary of the churches. Such organizations led to the peace movements of the 1980s, which in turn worked toward a peaceful reunification of East and West Germany.

In 1945, the Protestant Church published a controversial statement at Stuttgart confessing its guilt in the events which took place during the Nazi regime. This statement was not well received by Christians in Germany. Some felt it should also consider the guilt of Germany's enemies during World War II; others found it vague (Baum 47). At this time, the Soviets who controlled East Germany were tolerant of church activities (Schroeder 253).

Prompted by Karl Barth, the Darmstadt Declaration of 1947 was a restatement of Stuttgart, in the same spirit but expressed in greater detail. At the time of its publication, Darmstadt resulted in great indignation, and was not endorsed by the church (Baum 49). The spirit of Stuttgart and Darmstadt was the imperative that the Church not forget the German past. This concept later had a strong influence on Protestant theology in the GDR (53).

In 1949, the GDR came into being. The communist state "saw itself as a victorious creation after a long and painful antifascist struggle" (Baum 45). The Constitution of 1949 gave the Church certain rights, such as religious instruction in public schools. However, the government used public schools as a forum to promote official ideology, thus increasingly restricting the teaching of Christian doctrine in that setting (25). The Communists were committed to atheism, and there existed clandestine penalties for belonging to the church; for

example, students might not be admitted to university, or workers might not receive promotions (Edwards 16).

In the 1950s, the communist government grew increasingly hostile toward the church, increasing the repression of its members. In 1953 the antichurch movement reached its peak as the government made a “concerted attempt to break the church” (Edwards 16). According to Marxist doctrine, religion was unnecessary and would eventually die out. The question was, how much could or should be done to hasten the end (Schroeder 255)? The GDR asked for the Church’s help in creating and strengthening the socialist society. The late 1950s saw the removal of religious instruction from the public schools, leaving the Church solely responsible for Christian education (Baum 27).

In 1960, on the encouragement of Walter Ulbricht, president of the GDR, the Church in the GDR severed its link with the West German Church (Baum 60). In the late 1960s, the GDR was still 60 percent Lutheran. The constitution of 1949 lasted until 1968, when the government proposed a new constitution, under which the Church was the only organization able to offer sanctuary from the oppression of the government. Citizens of the GDR had only two choices: “either the state and its cloned clubs or the church” (Edwards 16). Despite the efforts of the state, the Church maintained its independence. One factor that helped maintain this independence was the fact that ministers were paid by the church, not by the government as before. However, the Church was still in an uncertain position. It had no real “bargaining power” with the government, and its privileges could be revoked at any time or its minor infractions of the law suddenly recognized and punished (Schroeder 254). In 1963, the two main Protestant Churches in the GDR, the EKV (the Reform church) and VELK (the Lutheran

church), published a common statement on the church's mission (Baum 106). This laid the groundwork for the creation of the Kirchenbund, which occurred in 1969.

The path of the Protestant Church in the GDR is unlike that of any other Church. It found its own path in the creation of the Kirchenbund. Important in the formation of the Bund was the spirit of the Barmen Declaration, a document published in 1934 which affirmed the Church's fidelity to Christ and Christ's liberation and empowerment of the Church. Barmen was considered a symbol of Protestant unity, because those who signed it belonged to different regional churches (83-86). The Bund was also inspired by the spirit of Stuttgart and Darmstadt (50), emphasizing the Church's need to remember the German past.

Another central idea in the creation of the Kirchenbund is the pastoral theology of *Ortsbestimmung*, the "discernment of place" which encouraged Christians living in the GDR to work for the good of the society in which God had placed them. The Bund was not formed only as a result of political pressure; there was a "theological and pastoral necessity" for it (Baum 34). Although the Bund had "internal plurality," it also accomplished "united action". It was able to speak for the Church in a single voice. The Bund's motto, in reference to living in a socialist society, was "Neither total refusal nor total accommodation" (21). The Church was faced with a new historical situation in a socialist society, and an alarming decrease in membership. The Bund accomplished several things which benefited this society, such as the creation of a program to help congregations teach young people after the government ended religious instruction in the public schools (28) and a program to teach pastors and lay ministers how to relate to people of various ages, economic situations, and so forth. These programs encouraged the growth of diversity in the Church (37).

An example of the internal plurality of the Bund is shown in the varying ideas of the churches within it. For example, a handout to the United Lutheran Church (VELK) asked: "Can Christians live in a state founded on atheistic principles?" A message by the Union Church (EKU) stated that God assigned Christians to the GDR, and while it recognized people's reasons for leaving, told congregations to "fear not" (Baum 29). A collective identity formed among the member churches of the Bund (30).

In accordance with the Bund's "neither total refusal nor total accommodation" motto, Hans Seigewasser stated that "the spiritual mission of the Church in socialism . . . demands that they not repudiate socialism, its humanistic policies, or its international relations" (Baum 61). The Bund rejected the idea of withdrawal from society, and instead encouraged increased cooperation, affirming its ministry "in" but not "for" socialism. The government was not satisfied with this position; it wanted the Church "to declare total adherence" to the socialist position (10).

The 1970s brought more government acceptance of the Church, and Christians in the GDR were able to hope for social reform (Baum 145). The churches were the only organizations with free social space for open discussion and thus became the home of several citizens' movements. Some of these groups were quite radical, directly criticizing the government; others were milder, such as the environmental concerns groups and the peace movement. The government's increased violence angered the Church and strengthened its support for these movements (Baum 13-17). The Church also became involved in outer society; for example, it "fought for conscientious objection and parental involvement in schools" (Edwards 17).

The Kirchenbund "began to realize that an exclusive demand on witness and service made an excessive demand on local congregations and did not respect the problems of ordinary

Christians” (Baum 37). It recognized the need for pastoral care and created a program to help pastors and church workers minister to people in various walks of life.

In 1971 the Kirchenbund was recognized by the state, with certain points made by the government. According to Baum, the five points were:

- Discussion of the churches’ relation to socialism must refer to the *existing* socialist society of the GDR.
- A negotiated understanding between Church and state does not imply either side’s abandoned philosophical vision.
- The Church may not be neutral between capitalism and socialism, but must minister in keeping with the constitution and social aims of the GDR.
- The more positive and unambiguous the Church’s relation to socialism becomes, the less it will be contradicted by its socialist members.
- A church that supports the humanistic aims and peace initiatives of the GDR is likely to gain the confidence of its government (63).

The 1971 Synod Report stated that as a community of witness and service, the Church must discern its location (*Ortsbestimmung*): “in this society shaped, not beside it, not against it” (62).

A similar sentiment is contained in the Report of 1973, which reminds Christians of the freedom and bondage of faith and urges all to do what is best for *society* (63).

After the March 6, 1978, agreement between the Bund and Erich Honecker recognizing the rights of the Church, relations between church and state improved (Schroeder 255). At this time, the Kirchenbund began a study on “Our Churches and Their Groups,” chaired by Heino Falcke, which was to determine whether the Church should continue to allow groups to assemble within it. The final decision was that the church could provide sanctuary and support for these

organizations without agreeing with all of their ideas (Baum 16). In September 1979, the Protestant Churches of both Germanies made a common statement on the church as a “Community of Liability”. This statement held that while Germans are not responsible for their history, they are *liable* for its events. As Schönherr put it:

We are not a community of guilt . . . yet we are a community of liability. We cannot appear before the world as members of the German people without the others saying to themselves: these are Germans, we know their history! . . . We carry our history . . .--our beautiful, rich, and great history-- . . . but we equally bear with us our dark and horrifying recent history” (Baum 54).

The Synod of 1980 insisted on the autonomy of the Church and presented a view of the partnership between church and state (Baum 118). In the early 1980s, the economy was stagnating, unemployment was climbing, and pollution had become toxic. A significant minority of GDR citizens applied for exit visas. Although bishops and pastors urged Christians to stay, believing that their duty was to witness in this society, the government nevertheless blamed church leaders for the increase in number of citizens deserting the GDR (Edwards 17).

In the 1980s many changes occurred in the GDR. The Church offered its critical support for the government’s peace policy; on the other hand, it criticized the government’s blame of Western nations for the arms race and for its creation of *Feindbilder*, both of which encourage war (Baum 130). A more radical peace movement had formed among the groups meeting in the Church, and the Church began its own “Swords to Ploughshares” movement, using the United Nations symbol as its sign for peace (Edwards 17). In 1983 tensions increased again when an official of the SED wrote that “The Church is the sole institution which neither corresponds to

the *spirit* of socialism nor springs from it, and which is superfluous for socialism and its development” (Schroeder 255).

In 1985, a new Church text appeared which “confirmed the unity of the Church’s pastoral ministry” (Baum 36): God’s Word is intended for all; thus Christians have a social responsibility. In the late 1980s the Church became involved in the “Conciliar Process for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation,” which mobilized congregations and secular groups in the name of *shalom*. The Report, a 200-page document, begins with an explanation of *shalom* in terms of the Old and New Testament and goes on to discuss what conversion to *shalom* would mean in the GDR (129, 131-2). One section of the Report is titled “More Justice in the GDR,” and describes the frustrations and powerlessness of citizens (133).

The concept of working for *shalom* was put into action in 1989 in Leipzig, where Monday night prayer services were held at four of its churches. These services led to peaceful protests, and are credited for “kindling the process of momentous change” (Yancey 72). October 7 was the GDR’s 40th birthday, and many consider this the date of *die Wende*, the great change (Edwards 17). On October 9, political pressure was expected to reach a critical mass. Communists filled all the seats of the Nikolaikirche in Leipzig, hoping to disrupt the service. Instead, they realized that the Church really was working for peace (Yancey 72).

Many feel that the Church-based movement for nonviolent resistance was responsible for the fall of the Communist regime. The Church’s “bold path between total rejection and total acceptance produced reformist hopes that undermined the government’s own self-understanding” (Baum 148). The Marxists’ view of religion had changed: in a developed socialist society, there was no need for strong anti-church movements (146). The government was divided between the hard-liners and those who held more conciliatory new trends in Marxist thinking, and the

realization that the government was divided against itself encouraged Christians to believe it was possible to reform socialism (147).

Until October 1989, reformism in the GDR was considered radical, heretical, and condemnable. Some wonder what *die Wende* would have been like without the Church's influence (Edwards 18). Would it have been violent? Would it have taken place at all?

The secure, familiar position the Church had enjoyed for so long as the *Landeskirche* (state church) in Germany was suddenly taken away with the Soviet takeover of eastern Germany following the second World War. Protestant churches, which had long been the dominant religious center for Christians in Germany, suddenly not only lost the support of the government, but faced persecution by it. In the face of the government's harassment of its members and oppression of its activities, the Church only gained a stronger will to work in society for the good of the citizens. By offering individual churches as meeting places for opposition groups, it helped to shape the peace movement that formed as a nonviolent one, and is thus credited with a great amount of influence in the peaceful reunification of Germany.

JJ.

Protestant Theology in East Germany, 1945-1989

The Theology of the Kirchenbund

The formation of the Kirchenbund accomplished a successful merging of ideas which allowed the churches of East Germany, who held different views, to form a united front through their common theology. The Bund was proud of the fact that in spite of its internal theological pluralism, it was able to arrive at “a common understanding of ministry, witness and service in the GDR” (Baum 22). An example of this understanding is the agreement reached by members of the Bund on interpretations of the Reformed doctrine of Christ’s Kingship and the Lutheran doctrine of Two Kingdoms which rendered the two complementary. According to the former doctrine, God’s kingdom reconciles the *whole* of humanity; the latter, however, implies that because of the separation of the kingdom of earth and the kingdom of God, no state or society could claim to be “Christian.” The two doctrines are complementary in that Christ’s kingship calls for Christian openness to the world and commitment to social justice, while the Two Kingdoms calls Christians to duty in the *worldly* kingdom. Through agreements such as this, a “singular theology” of the Kirchenbund was formed “despite pluralism in the church” (23).

In the years immediately following World War II, many church leaders felt it wisest to wait before taking action. It seemed best to learn to live within the new socialist society, as many assumed it would be only a temporary arrangement. However, by the 1960s it appeared that this new era was here to stay. Church leaders began to agree that Christians had been placed in the German Democratic Republic by God, and were there to do God’s work. At this time, two

important theological themes emerged: the discernment of place (*Ortsbestimmung*), and the learning process (Baum 29-30).

Active in the development of these themes and of the theology of the Kirchenbund was Albrecht Schönherr (1911-). He was a theologian and a member of the Weissensee Study Circle, an organization which published Theses on the following ideas: the encounter with Marxism/Leninism was God's will, the boundary between the realm of God and Satan is not necessarily parallel to the spheres of power, and Christ came because God loved the world (Baum 32). Schönherr also believed that what posed a threat to the church was "not cultural and political pressure from atheists; . . . [but] the absence of faith and love within the Christian community" (33).

The discernment of place, or *Ortsbestimmung*, was vital to Schönherr's theology because without it, he believed, students could not think theologically or be effective pastoral ministers (Baum 33). Schönherr was instrumental in the formation of the Bund's theology. He "strengthened the unity of the Bund despite internal pluralism" (35) and facilitated the development of a single, unifying theology which understood the church as a "community of witness and service" (35).

The theology of the Bund "revealed that despite its boldness, it sought to avoid one-sidedness and find balance" (Baum 37). In order to survive, the Protestant church had to be willing to "unlearn inherited attitudes" and to accept the challenge of new questions and a new historical reality (37).

The second important theme in the theology of the Kirchenbund is the learning process. Schönherr taught that the church should never stop learning. The message of the gospel is not "a set of principles to be accepted and obeyed" (Baum 38). Schönherr believed that Christ was "not

a universal principle to be applied to concrete situations, but a living person who addresses Christians in their historical context” (77). Jesus taught within the context of his historical situation; society had changed so much since Jesus’ time that a reinterpretation of the message was needed. According to Schönherr, “newness of this kind cannot be passed on in an authoritative, non-questioning way to the wider church community” (39). Instead, he points out the sources from which the church can learn: first, from God’s word alone; second, from others, specifically Marxists.

Schönherr found six Marxist ideas worth consideration in Christian theology and ministry. The first is the belief that the truth of theory must be tested by practice. This means that solutions to problems must be tested in practical situations. Another Marxist belief is that what is personal and private is conditioned by social context and cannot be truly understood unless this social relationship is uncovered. By this, Marxists mean that in order to understand individuals and private lives, the entire structure of a society must be examined. The human being is viewed by Marxists as an *ensemble* of social relations, emphasizing the *community*; whereas traditional Protestant theology understood humans as unrelated individuals. One Marxist idea whose truth cannot be denied is that economic and political powers play a decisive role in the course of human history. The question for Christians is, can there be obedience of faith unrelated to worldly powers? No single answer with which all agree has been determined. A commonly recognized Marxist view sees religion as an anesthetic for the exploited lower classes. Through the centuries, the church has defended unjust political systems and offered the poor the consolation of eternal life. The final Marxist belief which Schönherr considered a source of learning went hand in hand with Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s concept of the “church for others,” which will be described later in further detail. The GDR government offered support to

colonized and exploited nations in the struggle for liberation. Schönherr asked: Do Christians follow this example by extending solidarity to the poor and oppressed and becoming the church for others? (Baum 41-42).

In addition, Schönherr saw the church as “a learning community,” able to learn from its own mistakes. The church learned where to push an issue with the government and when to relax its resistance. One example is the *Jugendweihe*, the state’s secular alternative to confirmation. If students refused the *Jugendweihe* and instead chose to be confirmed in the Church, the government penalized them; for example, many students were denied entrance to university. For this reason, many Christians were reluctant to resist the government on this matter. To do so would have resulted in an unfair loss of their privileges and those of their children (Baum 43).

The Kirchenbund is the only example of a major religious organization that encountered socialism and survived in spite of it. Although the government refused to consider “religious philosophies” and “alternative socialist theories,” the Bund maintained the delicate balance between “total assimilation and total repudiation” of that government (Baum 64). Several of Schönherr’s speeches addressed the Church’s place in socialist society. Baum divides these speeches into five categories: the *unbridgeable gulf* between Christian faith and socialist theory, the need for Christian-Marxist *cooperation* in the GDR, the *ethical imperative* implicit in Christian-Marxist dialogue, what Christians can *learn* from this dialogue, and the *reformable character* of GDR socialism (71-72). Schönherr’s conclusion was that in order for the church to live in socialist society, it must adopt a position of “critical solidarity” (Baum 80).

The 1952 assembly of the International Missionary Council (IMC) at Willingen, West Germany, adopted the *missio Dei* concept, which concerns God’s reconciling in history, mediated

by the Church (Baum 124). Following this idea, the theology of the Kirchenbund hinted at God's saving action among non-Christians (Baum 141). As Johannes Hamel, an influential theologian of the time, believed, God wants to save *all* people; and as Dietrich Bonhoeffer felt, Jesus has been present throughout history as *savior* rather than *ruler* of all.

Bonhoeffer's influence

Although he was executed by the Nazis in 1945, long before the formation of the Kirchenbund, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) had an enormous influence on the theology of the Bund. His theology was as valid in the post-war period of Soviet rule as it was in his own lifetime, and it is still valid today. He believed that the concept of tradition *paralyzed* the church, and that in order to continue the church must be willing to give up the privilege and power it enjoyed in the past. This concept was adopted by Schönherr, who said that the church "should not be concerned with its own survival, but risk itself in service of the wider community" (Baum 89-90).

Bonhoeffer spoke of "a new language," possibly a non-religious one, that would liberate and reform concepts of religion (Feil 194). The Bund sought to live out Bonhoeffer's idea of the "church for others": witness and service, without self-concern; the church cannot exist without others, but must not be *as* others (109). That is, the church *needs* a society in which to live and work, but cannot allow itself to conform to those practices of society which go against the Church's fundamental principles.

Bonhoeffer's ideal church, described in *Act and Being*, is "not the institutional 'Catholic Church' . . . but neither is it a spiritual company composed of individuals who have separately responded to the preaching of the Word . . . It is outside *me* that the gospel is proclaimed and

heard, that Christ *is* in his community” (Hughes 498). Bonhoeffer recognized the necessity of an organized body for the church, yet he felt that “[w]e are proceeding towards a time of no religion at all: men as they are now simply cannot be religious any more” (510-11).

Bonhoeffer repeatedly concluded that “religion completely fits itself into existing social conditions . . .” (Feil 105). God has placed Christians in the GDR to spread the gospel and to work for the good of others. According to Bonhoeffer, work for the good of this world will bring Christians closer to God, as he said, “If you seek that which does not pass away, attend to that which does; if you seek that which is eternal, attend to that which is temporal; *if you seek God, attend to the world*. . . . The present alone is ‘the one truly significant hour’ . . . to flee from this hour is . . . to flee from God” (Feil 111). This need for reinterpretation of the gospel to fit contemporary situations was later recognized by the Kirchenbund.

Instead of restricting the Christian’s choice to either flight from or bondage to the world, he referred to the “ridge between” the two options (Feil 125). Bonhoeffer “sought to discern the reality and fulfillment of God’s kingdom on earth in a non-religious or secular manner”(Feil 114), a concept which complemented his idea of “church for others” and was later used by the leaders of the Kirchenbund. In addition, he saw God as “*universally* present in history, not as ruler but as servant and healer” (Baum 94); so that “[i]t is not a holy, sacred part of the world which belongs to Christ, but the whole world” (Feil 117). With this idea we are given a positive view of the world (144). To further emphasize his conviction that Christians must work in the situation in which God has placed them, Bonhoeffer said, “I fear that Christians who stand with only one leg upon the earth also stand with only one leg in heaven” (154). After all, “[t]he kingdom of God is not to be found in some other world beyond, but in the midst of this world” (Bonhoeffer 92).

In "Life Together" he seemed to put into perspective the conditions under which East German Christians live: "The Christian cannot simply take for granted the privilege of living among other Christians. Jesus lived in the midst of his enemies. . . . So Christians, too, belong not in the seclusion of a cloistered life but in the midst of enemies" (324). According to Bonhoeffer,

Rather than let the church withdraw into itself and to continue looking backward at the way things *were*, the Bund continued Bonhoeffer's search for new ways to reach out to and become involved in society. This brought about work toward "a new, nonreligious language" and an effort to become the "church for others," even if those *others* are not Christians.

Johannes Hamel

Johannes Hamel (1911-) was an East German theologian whose ideas were incorporated into the theology of the Kirchenbund. In a speech in 1957, he urged Christians to "abandon resentment," and to find a "more constructive approach" to society (Baum 27). Christians in East Germany were faced with a great challenge, but ". . . it is not necessarily a prophetic thing to be preaching in the safety of lands where 'religion is respected and honored,' and it is not necessarily a prophetic action to leave the difficult situation where God has placed one . . ." (Barth 14). Like Bonhoeffer, Hamel believed the choice of citizens was not limited only to "revolt" or "alignment," but that a middle ground could be found (16). He argued, "We must desist once and for all from placing Christianity and its teaching into the strait jacket of Christian anti-communism or pro-communism. A process of rethinking is needed that will not allow either side to retain its present position" (Barth and Hamel 102).

Hamel also acknowledged the value of the Marxist critique of the church, as long as Christians could listen to it “without either accepting it in terms of Marxist presuppositions, or becoming so defensive . . . that [they] turn to uncritical defense of the existing activities of the church” (Barth 18). As he put it, “we have to overcome the dilemma in which we are easily caught. It is the dilemma of either accepting the Marxist criticism of the church or of defending ourselves against all attacks. Both alternatives are deadly for the church, for they silence her as a voice for the gospel” (Barth 110).

Hamel made frequent reference to Scripture in his writings, and cited its “promise of a new era of redemption for this people and for all who live in this estranged world” (Barth 96), contained in Isaiah 4:9,11; Jeremiah 31:33 ff; Isaiah 40-55. He added that “[i]n the midst of idolatry, no less rampant in Babel than it is today, God created opportunities for his people to coexist with those blind Babylonians . . .” (98). In any case, “[w]hatever may have to be said about Marxism, it is certain that in the encounter with it we do not enter godless territory or a non-man’s land outside the reach of the gospel” (103). In his historical situation, Hamel felt that “[n]othing stands between us and the biblical Word. The Bible speaks to our situation as never before” (Barth 117).

Hamel saw several spiritual dangers, the first of which was the danger of *inner emigration*, a withdrawal from responsible life in the GDR or an idealization of the Western world. *Fear* and *hate* were also spiritual dangers: God wanted to save **all** people. Another danger was the *idealization of the communist state*. This could occur very easily; after all, “[w]hen sources of information are all coloured by the ideology, how is one to know other facts?” (Hamel 16-17). Finally, Hamel recognized the danger of *conformity* and *nihilism*. This,

too, was a common occurrence. Since “[o]nly a minority become enthusiastic ‘activists’ . . . The rest set themselves to survive . . .” (17).

Hamel’s caution against inner emigration served as an example to the Bund of the need to remain active in society. His warning against fear and hate of what is not known or understood reemphasized the need for a church for *all* others. Germans were cautioned against idealization of communism and conformity as well as nihilism (total repudiation), contributing to the Bund’s position of “critical solidarity” toward the government.

Karl Barth

Where Bonhoeffer anticipated the emergence of a new language which would bring liberation to all in a non-religious way, Karl Barth (1886-1968), a West German pastor and theologian, sought a new language with which to proclaim the Gospel. According to Philip Hughes, this idea “may be sound in principle, but it raises its own problems. The language is often difficult. It makes old truths sound strange. Does it also make them different?” (Hughes 51). However, it was with this new language that Barth found new inspiration in the Spirit’s use of Scripture in the present time (52). Using this new language in the search for freedom for all, Christian or non-Christian, Barth contributed greatly to the formation of the ideology of the Kirchenbund.

On the subject of the church in socialism, Barth explained that it was not necessary for the church to vehemently oppose the Marxist rule. He clarified this opinion by saying that while the decision against Nazism was a simple one, “Communism is not anti-Christian; it is simply and coldly non-Christian. . . . Thus it does not pose the same kind of threat to the life and message of *the church* that Nazism did . . .” (Barth 30-31). This brought Barth to the same

conclusion reached by Bonhoeffer, Hamel and Schönherr: that the church “must stand neither against the West nor the East. ‘It can only walk between the two’” (31).

Barth cautioned against hidden dangers, saying that “[e]vil in the twentieth century may be even more dangerous in its more subtle forms, those forms of evil which masquerade as good” (Barth 43). This sentiment echoed Schönherr’s belief that the real danger to Christianity is not atheism, but “the absence of faith and love within the Christian community” (Baum 33).

Barth, like Hamel, relied heavily on Scripture in his writing. In advising Christians in East Germany about the government under which they must live, he told them “. . . far better than anything I can say to you about your basic attitude to the alien power that overshadows you is what the prophet Jeremiah, in the 29th chapter of his book, writes to the exiled Hebrews in Babylon . . .” (Barth 56). In this chapter, Jeremiah urges the people to carry on with their lives and to look forward to the future despite what is happening in the present. The Lord promises to rescue them from exile, and will punish those who have not listened to the Lord.

Reiterating an idea expressed by Bonhoeffer, Barth stated that “[t]he time seems near or at least not far when the church in this form of existence will no longer have any place at all” (Barth 63). Bonhoeffer saw a need for great change in the church as it existed; and Barth now questioned whether Christianity could only survive “in that form of existence which until now has been taken for granted . . . Only in the light of that public assistance, recognition, or at least tolerance” (64). How could we think this, he wondered, when this was certainly not the experience of the first churches, and when we were never promised such a luxury in the future? (64). “No, the church’s existence does not always have to possess the same form in the future that it has possessed in the past, as though this were the only possible pattern. No, the continuance and victory of the cause of God, which the Christian Church is to serve with her

witness, is not unconditionally linked with the forms of existence which it has had until now”

(Barth 64).

In one letter, Barth addressed all Christians in East Germany, asking:

“Might it not be your special calling to be a living example for the rest of us of how a church lives that seeks for and perhaps has already entered upon a new way, of a church *for*, not of, the people . . .? Could it not be that you in the East Zone have been commissioned to lead the way for us also in that demolition and rebuilding of the church of which we spoke, not with great spectacular strides, but with small and therefore assured steps?” (Barth 65, 75).

Barth’s impact on the theology of the Kirchenbund lies in his search for a new language to express old truths; in his desire, shared by many others, to walk the fine line between East and West, between acceptance and resistance; in his advice to carry on with everyday life and look *forward*, not back (as cited from Jer. 29). He questioned whether Christians in the GDR had been placed there for a reason, whether perhaps God had a special goal that they were called to accomplish.

Bonhoeffer, Hamel and Barth all searched for a middle ground between revolt and alignment, between flight and bondage. Hamel, through his recognition of the value of Marxist critique, demonstrated the possibility of coexistence with Marxists without conformity. Bonhoeffer spoke of God as universally present in history, not only among Christians but among *all* people. This thought was shared by Barth, who spoke of a calling to be the church for all others.

Despite the many accomplishments of the Kirchenbund, there is still room to question whether it could have gone further. Perhaps the Bund was too cautious in its development of a common theology. However, wariness in this situation was understandable, considering the oppressive socialist government which controlled East Germany. The Bund made great strides in the formation of a united front for the church in the GDR. Caution in this work was certainly warranted, since the most important goal of the Bund was to find a common ground for its diverse member churches. If the Bund had been more radical in its resistance to the government instead of maintaining a balance between repudiation and acceptance and striving to live in harmony, its success in fostering and maintaining peace may not have been as great.



Conclusion

Upon the Soviet takeover in 1945, the Church in East Germany faced sudden oppression. Despite the forces working against it, the Church continued to live and even to prosper, actively contributing to socialist society. After World War II a wide gap between the economic and social status of East and West became apparent. Public discontent led to protests, which led to a temporary relief of government oppression. Later, in the 1970s, the GDR government began to allow its citizens to visit the West, hoping to alleviate their discontent. Instead, this practice served only to increase their sense of oppression. More protests were organized, and secret peace movements were formed which met within the shelter of the churches, the only places that possessed the right to free assembly. The churches were so beneficial in this respect because they recognized their duty to live *within* society and to adapt to its changes. This service to society has led many to credit the Church with the peaceful reunification of Germany.

The formation of the Kirchenbund resulted in a combined system of beliefs agreed upon by the different churches of East Germany, uniting them in one theology. Vital elements in the theology of the Kirchenbund were the discernment of place (Ortsbestimmung) and the learning process. The Bund was influenced by several prominent theologians, most notably Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Johannes Hamel, and Karl Barth. Albrecht Schönherr was also highly influential in the formation of the Bund. Working under the influence of these theologians, the Bund strove to serve the society in which it lived and to maintain a balance on the narrow ridge between the dangers of either repudiation or acceptance of the government. The Bund thus succeeded in

forming a common belief system for the Church in East Germany, paving the way for the church-housed movements that later led to the fall of Communist rule in the GDR.

By allowing the churches the only free social space in the GDR, the communist government destined them to “a locus of alternate thinking” (Mojzes 16). While others called for violent revolution, the churches called for peace and prayer. The *Volkskirche* (the “church of the people”) was successful in its role as advocate for the people, but Marxist government was able to undermine the Church’s relationship with individual Christians. The state thus raised two generations who are almost totally secular, lacking any contact with the Church (Downey 463). Religious instruction in schools is provided for in the constitution, but administrators are reluctant because they remember the forced indoctrination of the past (466). There is also some suspicion against the Church regarding claims about its involvement with the Stasi, the most elaborate state secret police organization in the world. Because of the doubt these accusations cast on the Church’s credibility, its contributions to the fall of communism in East Germany are now being qualified (Koenig 396).

The clergy during the socialist period were academically trained and heavily involved in social action, but intimate contact with parishioners was rare. Responsibility for society overshadowed ministry to individuals (Downey 463). This lack of training in pastoral care has become increasingly problematic, particularly in the area of youth ministry (Roerber 693). In today’s society new methods for ministry must be developed if the churches are to reach young people and to begin building up church attendance. This is a concern not only in Germany but in all of Europe. Churches have gone to what traditionalists would consider extreme measures in the effort to attract youth. Some recent events in Berlin include setting up “restaurants” and markets in churches and organizing “Raves for Christ” and Techno dance parties to attract teens

and young adults. Last year a theatrical production called “Christ with a Gas Mask”, which included a topless actress, was performed in the Matthaus church in Berlin. Although these events have caused great controversy, many of its officials feel that the Church must be willing to explore alternative practices and to cater to the mindset of today’s youth if it is to reach them and bring them into its membership (see Franchetti).

Elsewhere in Europe, alternative religious practices such as New Age, Hinduism, Transcendental Meditation, faith healing, and cults are gaining popularity. Church attendance at major religious events, especially Christmas services, is up; and other special celebrations have more and more participants. Valencia’s “Feast of the Fallas” in Spain is one example of such an event. It includes four days and nights of singing and dancing around 75-foot-tall papier mache monuments which are set on fire for “release and redemption”. This ritual dates back to the Middle Ages and is only mildly sacred. However, participation in the event indicates a public interest in religiosity.

There is, in Europe, also a strong American influence, evidenced in the emergence of “sneaker-wearing pastors” (Trueheart) who deliver messages on psychological counseling, social justice and environmental protection. Efforts to attract youth, parallel to those in the United States, are widespread. This summer the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) held its annual World Youth Day in Paris, France, and enjoyed overwhelming success, with over half of the attendees from France. The event has been called a “Christian Woodstock” (Trueheart). Although many criticize turning to such methods of attracting youth, events like this offer the most potential for attracting and holding the interest of young Christians. The RCC hopes, in the coming years, to extend its ministry to all Christians through the medium of World Youth Day. In this respect, it serves as an example of the Church recognizing the need to move forward.

The current trends in religious practice have been labeled “do-it-yourselfism” (French: *bricolage*). Religious books “on Buddhism and Jesus alike” (Trueheart) are bestsellers throughout Europe, and in France the religious top seller is the two-volume Encyclopedia of World Religions, indicating popular curiosity regarding religion and faith. Newly discovered interest in non-Christian faith practices, in addition to the desire to maintain tradition (as evidenced in the attendance at major Christian religious festivals), indicate that people are looking for something to believe in. As Germany finally begins to recover from the effects of war and division, its citizens are ready to reconsider previously despised ideas. This is the time for the Church to take action. As many of its leaders have already recognized and acknowledged, religion and faith in today’s world cannot be measured by or modeled after previously set standards. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, tradition can *paralyze* the Church rather than allow it to thrive; these words, written at the time of the Nazi regime, remain valid for the Church today. Although some of the efforts to bring people back to the churches are unorthodox and strange to many, it has become apparent that people are seeking a new religion that fits easily into their lifestyles and in which they can play an active part. Many have formed personal belief systems independent of traditional indoctrination, and they are not willing to revert to past practices.

There is in the Church in Germany a significant deficiency in the *pastoral* education of pastors. To help them become effective *ministers*, pastors will require increased training in areas such as counseling, social ministry and youth ministry, in addition to their basic theological education. In order for the Church to survive in Germany in the socialist period, it had to become the Church for others. Today it must continue to strive toward this goal, remembering the teachings of the great theologians who believed that the Church must continue to adapt to the society in which God has placed it, even if such adaptation requires a departure from tradition.

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