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**A NEW LEARNING PROCESS HAS BEGUN:  
THE CHURCH IN A POST-SOCIALIST SOCIETY**

**By Günther Krusche**

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The events which we have accustomed ourselves to call "the Turning" (*Die Wende*) caught the church in the German Democratic Republic just as unprepared as other social forces. The unsung end of the power structure of the Socialist Unity Party, on the one side, and the spectacular opening of the Wall, on the other, have created a completely new situation not only in the two German states but also in Europe as a whole. Only gradually have the responsible actors become aware of the wide effect of these changes, aimed first at an alternative socialism ("socialism with a human face") then at an alternative to socialism ("freedom instead of socialism"), and ended finally at a call for German unity ("we are one people"). The social scene has changed so fundamentally in the last half year that one is inclined to compare it with an earthquake that has shaken the structure of geological formations and brought them into new and unusual contacts with one another. After the election of March 18, 1990 a widespread uncertainty grasped the people, constantly nourished by new revelations about the Stasi, rumors about the dismantling of social security, and the currency union that everyone longed for but on more favorable terms. All this left many GDR citizens secretly longing for the securities of a lost command economy.

In this upheaval, the Evangelical Church in the GDR has also had a break, an exodus in search of new horizons. It will need to prove itself as a "community of learning" (A. Schönherr) and show that it has learned the lessons of forty years in the German Democratic Republic.

I.

The Evangelical Church in the GDR was concerned during the time of "real existing socialism" to find its own way between accommodation and rejection as a community of

witness and service. It sought to be a church "not alongside of, not against, but in socialism", not a church for itself but a "church for others" (D. Bonhoeffer). The formula "church in socialism" was therefore not an expression of accommodation but the result of a long and difficult process of learning. The church in the GDR consciously took up the challenge of society, which required it to face new circumstances. The first step on this way was confrontation, the drawing of boundaries. Traces of the rigidity this led to are still widespread in the congregations. Confronted with a Marxist-Leninist ideology which, to the very end did not give up its atheistic component, a critical consciousness developed during these forty years which expressed itself in the church's renunciation of power and distancing from the state. The church respected the socialist way as an attempt to realize more justice for everyone, but it retained its freedom of "cooperation in concrete decisions" (W. Krusche) in "critical solidarity" (H. Falcke) with people in the society. Even after the quasi-recognition of the Union of Evangelical Churches in the GDR through the conversation between Erich Honecker and Albrecht Schönherr on March 6, 1978, it continued to demonstrate its independence, in the structuring of church life, in the question of peace ("Denial of the Spirit, Logic and Practice of Deterrence") and in cultivating relationships with sister churches in the Evangelical Church in Germany and in the oikoumene (Conference of European Churches, World Council of Churches et al.).

But in the churches a critique arose of their own practice. Socialism was seen as a critical question to the churches and to Christians; the rise of a socialist labor movement as the result of the churches' failure. The anti-fascist tradition of the Communists became a question to the attitude of the church in the Weimar and Nazi times. Only the recent reception of Bonhoeffer's theology has made possible a critical understanding of the history of the Confessing Church and the German Christians. Only recently as well, despite the government dictated German-Soviet friendship, has the church itself come to terms with the anti-communism in its midst, and made reconciliation with the people of the Soviet Union and other Eastern neighbors its theme. In matters of church, state and war, the leading theologians and spokespersons of the synods in the GDR have taken positions as a rule somewhat to the left of the majority of church representatives in the Federal Republic of Germany. This forebodes sharp disagreements to come.

## II.

So, almost perforce peace, environmental, and human rights groups found themselves, or sought refuge under, the church's roof in a process that was full of creative conflict and tension. The spectrum was broad. It reached from church-oriented peace groups all the way to disguised opposition groups that openly admitted they were only using the church because

the system of "democratic centralism" left no other holes in the system. So the church became an agent of change, even though its representatives made the point again and again that the church was not a political opposition. In all honesty it must be said that the Evangelical Church was only one factor among others in bringing about the change that happened. Without the framework of the Helsinki process, which gave a charismatic personality like Gorbachev room to work, without the many activities of groups which took the text of the concluding act of Helsinki as their charter, and without the self-caused breakdown of "real existing socialism," due to its bad public relations and inefficient economy (to name only the basic elements) the "Turning" would never had happened. In the last heated phase in the autumn of 1989, the church did indeed play a decisive role. Its representatives were finally the only ones who could mediate between the government and the people and overcome the general failure of communication. The church gave the character of non-violence to a peaceful revolution. Now the complexity of the process of reform points to a new challenge. The clear opposition between the church and a state with an atheistic worldview has been replaced by the various challenges of a pluralistic society. The time of clear enemies is over.

### III.

In fact, we have been thrown back "to the beginnings of our understanding" (Bonhoeffer). We cannot simply continue the experiences of the years behind us. Once again, we are called to be immigrants in a new society regardless of the way and the conditions under which German unity comes about. Also in the new situation, the church must prove itself as a community of witness and service, as a "church for others". In the middle of the political conflicts of recent years, the church has always rightly maintained that the content and form of Christian engagement with the world must be measured by the word of God and by its central confession. But the word does not become thereby the ward of the church. The message of God's openness for humanity, of God's unconditional acceptance of human beings despite all their deficits, was the point at which conflict with the Marxist view of humanity first broke out. It has consequences today for the polis and therefore for politics: reconciliation among people with opposing views, building trust as the basis of peace and justice in the common life, protection of each person's dignity, including the weak. The results of the conciliar work on justice, peace and the integrity of creation, as they have been written in the documents of ecumenical assemblies, are among the permanent fruits of the learning process in the churches in the GDR as well. The "preferential option for the poor" which is there expressed, we would like to bring into the process of growing church community.

The social conditions for witness and service, however, are already beginning to change. After the fall of the Marxist-Leninist power structure with its bureaucratic distortion, a vacuum has arisen, not only of power but also of social values and goals. The former ideological opponent is suddenly no longer there. The church has to give up its ideological fixation on the conflict between Marxism and Christianity along with the social problems of the past in favor of an open dialogue with a pluralistic society. The church is becoming aware in retrospect of the way in which the principle of separation of church and state in its GDR form had pushed the church to the edge of the society. The removal of Christian instruction from education, the movement to force resignations from the church in the 50s, agitation for the youth dedication ceremony in the schools, the end of official assistance in collecting church taxes, and restrictions on permissions for church activities, pushed the church to the edge of the society. Since the Evangelical Church in the GDR was traditionally a church of all the people, it had nothing convincing to set against this restriction of its public outreach. In terms of numbers it became a minority in diaspora and understood itself as "salt of the earth", "light of the world", and therefore as a small but decisive minority. Unfortunately the church in the GDR had not made much progress on the way to becoming a confessing church. Today, therefore, most evangelical Christians in the GDR still show this Volks-church background in spite of stronger engagement and more conscious participation than in earlier times. Still, the way back to the Great Church is closed to us. Atheistic propaganda only forced the pace of secularization which was turning the church into a minority in a pluralistic society, also in other highly industrialized countries. It is doubtful whether a return to the system of church taxation on the model of the Evangelical Church in West Germany, or a return to the role of master of ceremonies of the society in the sense of civil religion, will liberate our churches and congregations from their minority status. It is much more important, I believe, to accept the situation and to enter as a small decisive minority into the dialogue of the whole society about the future of the polis. The significance of the church and of individual Christians for the whole will be decided by their competence in dialogue and communication.

#### IV.

What particular tasks are indicated for the church in this transition to an open post-socialist society?

##### **1. The service of prophetic criticism.**

The church may not allow itself to be deprived again of the freedom to meddle in politics. It owes a post-socialist society the service of "cooperation in concrete decisions". In an open society, which we all hope and strive for, the church will exercise its office as

prophetic guardian in "critical solidarity" with humanity. The GDR experience shows that the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount are politically effective in their consistent renunciation of the principle of retribution and in commanding the love of enemies. Must we not discover the partner of tomorrow in the enemy of today, if there is to be a future? Even if the church in an ideologically neutral society comes once again into close proximity with political decision makers (for example, through the membership of Christians in decision making councils) it must still be aware of the critical perspective of the Christian tradition. The danger of accommodation threatens not only a "church in socialism"!

## **2. The pastoral service of a church in solidarity.**

Before the "turning", it was the oppressed of a socialist society (dissidents, ex-prisoners, conscientious objectors to military service and at the end masses of people who longed to emigrate) who sought the advice and help of the Evangelical Church. Now it is disoriented Marxists, powerless government officials or party leaders, yes, even despairing former members of the Ministry for State Security who come. They ask for acceptance as persons in need, and for pastoral care. They raise questions about the meaning of life. They seek work. Further huge challenges to our diaconate loom ahead: unemployment, drug dependence, social need created by the dismantling of state subsidies, the activities of new religions and sects. The church is hardly prepared for all these problems. "Church for others" is now being tested under new conditions. The possibilities and capacities of a minority church are certainly inadequate. We must find new social partners and financial supporters. Only by cooperation can these great needs be met. A church which is concerned about itself and own profile will not be able to find the necessary openness for this cooperation. The ghetto -- and niche -- mentality which we still find in our congregations, must be dissolved in a new openness to the world as we have learned through ecumenical contact. "Church for others" now more than ever!

## **3. The service of a moral agent to the new orientation of society.**

Let there be no misunderstanding: the church is no more called to be the disciplinarian of society than to be its master of ceremonies. Also in moral questions, it can only be a partner, a participant in the search for a new orientation. But when we are asked, we must answer. The moral vacuum that a collapsed socialism has left behind leaves people bewildered. A new search for standards of value, for guidance in ways of living and the formation of ethical judgments, has awakened. Church workers are being asked in schools and universities to give information about personal living, about political ethics, about pastoral care and naturally also about religion, in addition to the many claims upon them in the narrower political sphere. They are often pushed, thereby, to the limits of their competence. They feel themselves poorly prepared for these demands. The question of Christian identity has been posed in a new and unexpected way. A basic social consensus is

not yet in view. It seems as if consumerism has taken the place of communism for many citizens of the GDR. "Real existing socialism" produced an army of frustrated would-be prosperous citizens. But the social aspect of human rights must not be lost if we are working for a society of solidarity rather than of elbowing competition. Above all, enormous tasks lie before the church in the area of education. Its cooperation is being sought from all sides in building a new pedagogical system without the narrowness of a "class standpoint". But also political morality needs critical accompaniment. In spite of proclaimed socialist internationalism, the mentality of the GDR was at heart provincial, without a world horizon, oriented toward itself. This was not in the first place the fault of citizens who could not travel. Enmity toward foreigners, lack of historical consciousness, uncritical nationalism and lack of political interest -- these are always the long-term results of being cut off from the rest of the world.

The church can be helpful in all these problems, drawing from the treasure of its ecumenical experience. First, however, it needs to keep the social dialogue going, to recognize the signs of the times, and to build bridges with its reconciling power between political fronts. Through its clear renunciation of political power, the church gains moral authority for its representatives to moderate roundtables in the political sphere and to point out burning problems. We are clear that this political function can only be undertaken in deputyship, as long as it is necessary for the building of a truly open and mature society. One of the imperishable results of the learning process of the church in a socialist society is expressed in the sentence, "the church is only then the church of Jesus Christ when it is church for others" (Bonhoeffer).