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By Roger Newell, George Fox University

Pastor Christian Führer of the Nikolai Church in Leipzig, the founding organizer of the famous peace prayers in the 1980s, died on 30 June, at the age of seventy-one. Not long ago, Professor Roger Newell of George Fox University, Newberg, Oregon took a party of students to visit sites of special significance in European Church history. One of their stops was in Leipzig, about which he reported as follows:

We were welcomed by the good Pastor who led us straight into the church, right up to the main altar, explaining that this was formerly reserved for the priests in centuries past, but now was open to everyone. There we got a short tour of the church building, its history and the tradition of music (including the link with J.S. Bach, who functioned mainly in the nearby Thomaskirche). Then he took us to the adjacent priests’ vestry, where he told us the story of his ministry beginning in the early 1980s. He reminded us that it was a time of increasing tension between East and West. The Cold War’s trench cut Germany in half. On both sides of the Berlin Wall, Germans grew increasingly anxious that Germany could become the battleground for Europe’s third war in this century. At the same time, what was then the government of East Germany vastly increased its police-state controls through its secret policy (the Stasi) which deployed a huge force backed by unofficial collaborators to keep tabs on any possible opponents and dissidents. It made for a highly oppressive situation where suspicion and mistrust reigned.

This was the brooding climate in which Pastor Führer opened the doors of the church to young people anxious to discuss such things. The initial gathering took place in 1981 when Pastor Führer invited people with concerns about peace and the arms race to meet at the Church late in the evening (possibly to avoid Stasi attention). He expected maybe ten or so people to come and let off some steam. But to his astonishment ten times that number showed up. They were mostly young, many of them dissidents who were not getting along with the Communist government.

Next, Führer described how he brought everyone right to the central altar, sat them on the floor of the church and laid a large rough wooden cross on the floor in their midst. He asked everyone who wanted to raise a point to take a candle, light it, and speak to their concern as they placed their candle around the cross. If the dissidents were surprised to find themselves at an old-fashioned prayer meeting, it was Pastor Führer’s turn to be surprised when every single
person lit a candle, spoke a concern and shared in what turned out to be the most significant prayer meeting in the forty year history of the German Democratic Republic. The sharing continued past midnight as gradually the bare wooden cross changed into a cross glowing with light. The mood of openness, freedom and acceptance was so life-giving that no one wanted to leave. It was a harbinger of things to come of which no one sitting there could have foreseen.

As I read later in the Nikolai brochure:

> When we open the church to everyone who has been forced to keep silent, has been slandered or maybe even imprisoned, then no one can ever think of a church again as being simply a kind of religious museum or a temple for art aesthetics. On the contrary, Jesus is then really present in the church because we are trying to do what he did and what he wants us to do today. This is the hour of the birth of the Nikolai Church--open for everyone--also for protest groups and those living on the margin of society. Throw open the church doors! The open wings of the church door are like the wide open arms of Jesus: "Come unto me, everyone who is troubled and burdened, and I will relieve you!" And they came and they come!

From this first event Führer would eventually arrange what he called 'peace prayers' to meet every Monday evening at 5 p.m. to pray for peace in both local and international situations of conflict. Later these prayers were sometimes followed by the people walking into the streets carrying candles to witness for peace and freedom. These were the largest and also the most peaceful of any such demonstrations in the GDR.

A particular moment of tension occurred in May 1989 following a blatantly fraudulent election in which the Communist party claimed to have received 98% of the votes cast. The public was outraged at such a flagrant deception. Calls for reform grew louder. The police reacted by blocking all driveways to the church, seeking to shot down the Monday prayer meetings, which they determined had become a cover for political insurrection. Nevertheless the crowds only increased.

On October 7, the GDR was due to celebrate its 40th anniversary. President Gorbachev, the author of the movement for openness and Perestroika, attended from the Soviet Union. Naturally the government did not want the occasion to be used for any kind of public expression of discontent. In Leipzig, for ten long hours police battered and bullied defenseless demonstrators who made no attempt to fight back. Many were taken away in police vehicles.

In this heightened atmosphere, just two days later, Monday 9 October, the peace prayers were to be held. The government warned protesters that any further demonstrations would not be tolerated. All day long, Führer told us, the police and military tried to intimidate them with a hideous show of force. Schools and shops in the city were shut down. Roadblocks were built. The police had guns loaded with live ammunition. Soldiers with tanks were mobilized and surrounded the central area. Extra beds and blood plasma had been assembled in the Leipzig hospitals. Rumors from many reliable sources circulated that the government intended to use the "Chinese Solution" and repeat the massacre of Tienanmen Square in Beijing.
To neutralize and perhaps disrupt the prayer meeting, 1000 party members and Stasi went early on to the church. 600 of them filled up the nave by 2 p.m. But, as Führer described it in the brochure:

_They had a job to perform. What had not been considered was the fact that these people were exposed to the word, the gospel and its impact! I was always glad the the Stasi agents heard the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount every Monday. Where else would they hear these?_

So the stage was set, the actors assembled for the climatic Monday prayer service. Huge numbers came out to pray, not only at the Nikolai Church but at other churches throughout the city, which had joined the peace prayers. During the service, the atmosphere and the prayers were serenely calm. As he prepared to send the people out into the streets, Pastor Führer made a final plea to the congregation to refrain from any form of violence or provocation. The Sermon on the Mount was again read aloud.

As the doors opened for the worshipers to depart, something unforgettable happened. The 2000 people leaving the sanctuary were welcomed by tens of thousands waiting outside with candles in their hands. That night an estimated 70,000 people marched around the main city streets. Though the police and the military were everywhere, Pastor Führer said: _Our fear was not as big as our faith ... Two hands are needed to carry a candle and to protect it from extinguishing. So you cannot carry stones or clubs at the same time._

As the good pastor noted:

_There were thousands in the churches. Hundreds of thousands in the streets around the city centre. But not a single shattered window. This was the incredible witness to the power of non-violence. ... It was an evening in the spirit of our Lord Jesus for there were no winners and no defeated. Nobody triumphed over the other, nobody lost his face. There was just a tremendous feeling of relief._

It was later reported that Horst Sindemann, a serving member of the Central Committee of the GDR, summed up both the extensive preparations of the authorities as well as their inability to know how to respond to the events of that evening:

_We had planned everything. We were prepared for everything. But not for candles and prayers._

A month later the Berlin Wall was breached, and the whole Communist empire crumbled away.