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STIER REPLACES RATHKE AS BISHOP OF MECKLENBURG CHURCH
by Bill Yoder

Yoder, a freelance journalist in West Berlin, covered Bishop Stier's installation for "Lutheran World Information."

On June 30, 1984, Christoph Stier was installed as bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Mecklenburg. These ceremonies in Schwerin Cathedral rang down the curtain on the unique, 13-year "reign" of Heinrich Rathke. Even the appointed moment of the outgoing bishop's departure was unusual, since Rathke is still nine years away from the official age of retirement. It was noted in Schwerin that there is as of yet no German designation for Rathke's new status, because he is neither a bishop nor a bishop emeritus.

Shortly after Rathke's installation as bishop March 27, 1971, the Synod of Mecklenburg had passed a precedent-setting regulation limiting the term of bishop to 12 years. Re-election, though, was permitted. Rathke belonged to the main instigators of this regulation and had made it clear from the beginning that he did not intend to serve for more than a single term. He planned to return there from where he came--the parish. "We all--including the bishops--serve on recall in this," he liked to say. "The service of one should again flow into and become the service of all."

From the outset many had doubted the earnestness of the bishop's stated intentions. But at the reception following the inauguration of Stier, lay moderator Siegfried Wahrmann was forced to concede that "you have kept your word." Wahrmann added, "When it became known that you really would not be extending your term, there was considerable soul-searching. There was disappointment, but also much confirmation. Perhaps you have shown us the way into a new era. That, church history will need to decide." At the reception Russian Orthodox Archbishop Melchisedek spoke up for the dissenters when he expressed the hope that Rathke's successor would "serve for more than 12 years."

The election of Stier has been regarded as a vote for continuity. In a further word of greeting at the Schwerin reception, Dr. Johannes
Hempel, bishop of the Lutheran Church of Saxony, noted jokingly that "apparently the fellow who just left was not so bad, because the Synod went ahead and picked itself a similar one." What are the essentials of the course that Rathke has been portraying to his church?

The Imperative of Peace

Rathke has stated that there is no undertaking that the church needs to take more seriously than its mandate to educate for peace. He concedes that virtually every state requires an army for defensive reasons, but opposes all measures that go beyond the boundaries of a strictly defensive stance. He stated last year, "To militarize an entire people and to teach them to hate goes beyond these essentials." He condemns war toys for children and stated at the Mecklenburg Synod in March 1983, "We make ourselves guilty if we allow our children and youth to be given weapons and be taught to enjoy shooting."

At the United Lutheran (VELK) Synod three years ago, Rathke protested against the incrimination of pacifists in both East and West. "Pacifists are to prepare the age of peace," he concluded, "and those precisely are the kind of people we need."

The outgoing bishop has been vehemently opposed to any increase in nuclear weaponry on East or West German soil. He had expressed his disappointment with the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) peace statement of 1981, which had concluded that atomic weaponry neither attained nor prevented peace. He contends that the East German Evangelical Federation has moved beyond such a vacillating black-is-also-white position. Rathke has continually appealed for the need to respect the legitimate security interest of the other side, including those of the East German government. He supports his federation's condemnation of the "spirit and logic of deterrence" and perceives it to be the church's role to place itself as an unarmed and defenseless mediator into the no-man's-land dividing warring factions.

Rathke's position on peace is somewhat unique for the German Democratic Republic (GDR) church in that he has not directed his primary efforts at reconciliation toward the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). He has instead directed his gaze eastward. He recognizes better than most GDR Christians their crying need for fellowship and reconciliation with
the people and churches of the Soviet Union. He has undertaken several trips to the USSR, also under the auspices of the Lutheran World Federation. Despite Soviet government hesitation, he has succeeded in pioneer efforts to establish ties between the GDR churches and other churches in the Baltic States and in Asia. The Lutheran Archbishop Janis Matulis of Riga made the trip to Schwerin in order to express the gratitude of his church.

**Loyalty to the Citizens of the GDR**

Though the departing bishop is clearly "neither dissident nor cheerleader," he has remained emphatically committed to staying within the GDR and serving as Christ's witness there. In the wake of the immense wave of emigration visas granted earlier this year he bemoaned the fact that so many persons were "quietly and secretly disappearing from our midst." He has claimed, "I want to have, no one here in my church who doesn't want to be in this country." He said, "Life here has its possibilities; here you are needed."

Interestingly, the past bishop does not recognize the priority of propagating a continuing and usually futile internal unity between the East and West German Protestant churches. He regards it of greater significance that "each church fulfill its calling right there within its own context. After all, relations between the GDR and FRG churches are now "more intensive and fraternal" than prior to their division in 1969. Yet the two West German representatives at the reception in Schwerin insisted, even in the presence of GDR government officials, on stressing the ongoing unity of the German nation and church. Rathke has been attempting to extend the "special relationship" between GDR and FRG churches to include those of foreign nationality.

**The Priesthood of All Believers**

Heinrich Rathke has taken the priesthood of all believers seriously. It has been said that his greatest gift lies in his "ability to converse with each and every person in the very same manner." He first joined the Synod of Mecklenburg in 1959. Lay Moderator Wahrmann recalls that during Synod recesses he was usually "surrounded by farmers and other folks from the country." Rathke claims he is happiest when he "gets nearest to
people."

Journalist Gerhard Thomas reports Rathke had no waiting room and was "ready to help anyone at any time with anything in any fashion." Bishop Hempel states that his colleague "gave all he had and more." During the inauguration, Rathke told his successor, "Your primary place is within the congregation. You are to serve those who are weak and heavy laden, those who are readily overlooked and pushed aside." Thomas adds that government officials also required time to become acclimated to Rathke's "lack of regal bearing." Rathke had complained as early as 1972 that "titles and robes" still played a "dubious role" and warned against an elitist mentality still prevalent among men of the cloth.

The outgoing bishop's regard is coupled with a healthy dosage of honesty and forthrightness. When the government refused to discuss the issue of military training in secondary schools five years ago, he requested in print that the state "spare our youth such treatment in the future." Rathke explains, "I have learned, that the more open I am with the government from the outset, the more trust I will reap in the long run." Wahrmann conceded at the inaugural reception that Rathke had "built up trust within state circles." Honesty is more constructive than flattery.

Simplicity

It dawned on Rathke in Soviet Central Asia that the East German churches could logically be regarded as outposts of the "Golden West." He concluded, "We are wealthy; we should be ashamed of ourselves. How can we, in view of our wealth, speak of hard times?" In Soviet Asia he noticed that even those believers in their utter weakness "had the strength to make others wealthy." Strength can be found in simplicity.

Rathke has been greatly perturbed by the GDR Christians' considerable wealth; 25 percent of the church budget is covered by contributions from the West. "We drive a great deal with our cars," he has noted, "even with those that we never needed to buy." He has appealed to all church members to tithe and sees no reason why they "could not cover their own expenses and even more."
Ecumenism

According to Hempel, the Lutherans of Mecklenburg have for years "expressed unbounded readiness for cooperation." They have been among the staunchest advocates of a "United Evangelical (Protestant) Church in the GDR"—a dream that is still far removed from reality. In a word of greeting, the Catholic Bishop of Schwerin, Heinrich Theissing, thanked Rathke for their mutual friendship, which had grown out of a strictly formal relationship. Rathke has enjoyed attributing this friendship to the fact that "both of us are Heinrichs."

Rathke was also instrumental in establishing a theological dialogue with the Russian Orthodox Church. His ecumenical concerns truly bridged numerous confessional and political boundaries reaching at least from Bavaria to Kazakhstan.

His Life is His Message

What makes Heinrich Rathke's stance particularly credible is the simple truth that his life is part of the message. Rathke, who was born in 1928, is a native of Mecklenburg. Yet he remained in West Germany after 1945, where he completed his theological studies, married a young woman from Bavaria and served as a vicar (pastoral intern). He laughingly admits that by late 1953 he had evolved into a "genuine and authentic West German." But precisely at that time he and his urbanized wife pulled up stakes and moved into the "East Zone." They landed in Althof, near the Baltic Sea. They arrived there by horse and wagon, the village being inaccessible by car. Yet more grievous than the absence of automobiles and electricity was the lack of political certainty at that time.

In 1962 Rathke became pastor in a new, high-rise housing district on the outskirts of Rostock. The family remained there for eight years. Due to complete lack of church buildings in such a district, the pastor was forced to hold services in an old circus wagon. "Fellowship was more attainable there than in many of these cold, new churches," he adds. Only a short time after abandoning the circus wagon, the pastor found himself in the bishop's chair.

Heinrich and Marianne Rathke have six sons and one daughter, none of whom have had access to the flashy careers much more attainable to the offspring of Western clergy. But the Rathkes claim to have no regrets.
So, as of July 1, 1984, the Rathke family has made a second move eastward and "downward." Rathke now is serving as pastor in the small town of Crivitz. The bishop's sleek Volvo and extensive travel privileges have been passed on to his successor. Yet Pastor Rathke says he's looking forward to "being with my people continually, not just every now and then."

The Matter of Continuity

Christoph Stier and Heinrich Rathke appear to have more than a few things in common: both of them became bishops at the age of 43, both were unknown and both had been pastors in Rostock's new high-rise apartment districts. Both are counselors too modest to ever become flamboyant orators. Neither has done theological work of any particular significance. Both of them were carried into the bishop's office by the vote of the grass-roots laity. Hempel stated in Schwerin that both of them possess "the charisma of incorruptible loyalty."

Very near the opening of his inaugural sermon, Stier made it clear that he considered all victims of the military draft among the "weak and heavy laden." Peace education will undoubtedly continue to remain a priority. His own immediate family--he and his wife have three children--have taken a particularly resolute stance against military training.

In his closing statement at the inaugural reception, Stier said, "Our work will go on. After all, its direction is clear." Due to the uniqueness of each and every individual, the new bishop of Mecklenburg will undoubtedly maneuver differently than did his predecessor. But the destinations remain the same. Nor will Stier need to feel lonely in the Volvo; at least for the first indefinite number of kilometers the "bishop in limbo" will be whispering encouragement from the back seat.