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GLIMPSES OF EAST GERMAN CHURCH EVENTS IN 1990

By Bill Yoder

Bill Yoder (Mennonite) is an ardent observer of the religious scene in East Germany, having lived there for some years. He wrote a series of shorter articles which he offered to OPREE. They reflect the situation in the Spring of 1990. We brought them together in a single article, each section presenting another aspect in the rapidly changing situation prior to the reunification of Germany. Yoder's articles appeared in previous issues of OPREE.

EAST GERMAN EVANGELICALS IN FEBRUARY 1990

Developments in the German Democratic Republic are keeping evangelicals there breathless. Manfred Kern, a Baptist minister and General Secretary of that country's Evangelical Alliance, describes his life as being one of constant, "excitable tension." "We now have the opportunity to do everything which is humanly possible," he states. "We are limited only be our own number of workers and the multitude of (undone) tasks." Christian literature is pouring into the country and tent-evangelistic campaigns are being planned for the summer. Every week several Western mission agencies approach the Alliance about the possibilities of beginning ministries in East Germany. Kern notes that East German churches will also be attempting to print as much literature themselves as the constant paper shortages allow. Uwe Holmer, the Lutheran pastor who has offered refuge in his home to the ailing Erich Honecker and his wife, Margot, is a close friend of Kern. Indeed, Holmer is chairman of the national "Conference of Evangelists." Though the Holmers have been the object of vicious protests, and even of bomb threats, Manfred Kern assures categorically, that "I can understand him very well and would have done the same thing if placed in his shoes." The Holmers have ten children, none of whom was ever allowed to enter a college preparatory school. It is highly ironic that the person most responsible for that injustice-- Margot Honecker was Minister of Education for nearly three decades--is now residing in their parents' home. Not a few local Christians have long been praying for the conversion of their government leaders. One article reminds believers that they should not start protesting now once God has begun answering their prayers. In mid-December, Reinhard Assmann, a Baptist pastor in Bitterfeld near Leipzig, was among the Christian activists who entered the
local secret police headquarters and sealed rooms to prevent further tampering. "We turned the
tables and interrogated them for five hours," he states. Many personal and spiritual
topics were broached. Assmann hopes to befriend some of those former secret police
officials whose worldview and calling were destroyed by the events of this past fall.
Eyebrows were raised when the main communist party daily, *Neues Deutschland*, printed
advertisements from "Aktion in Jedes Haus," an evangelistic door-to-door ministry prominent
throughout West Germany. Gregor Gysi, the S.E.D. party leader, rebuffed protests from
the party faithful with the cheeky remark, "After all, he (Jesus) was the only one who didn't
leave us." The process of German unification is sure to leave a major mark on the church;
all of those denominations forcibly split in 1969-- only the Quakers remained a single
organizational entity-- are attempting to implement some form of reunification. Seminaries
and periodicals will be shut down within the foreseeable future; a significant streamlining
of church organizations is in the offing. Yet, the rush towards national and church
unification does not leave all evangelicals jubilant. Open borders have flung open the gates
for sects as well as mission societies of questionable repute. Manfred Kern notes that some
missions "possess more missionary zeal than wisdom." He remains concerned that new efforts
adjust to the local context and work in conjunction with existing, neighboring organizations.
"We have experienced forty years of intensive, evangelistic work in this country. Yet some
visitors leave the impression that evangelism has only become possible since the opening of
the Wall."

Perhaps most seriously, moderate and left evangelicals are worried that the hard spiritual
lessons taught during decades of state-imposed duress will be quashed by the unification
steamroller. According to Kern, East German evangelicals have, thanks to a common
adversary, learned to "concentrate on the essentials" and thereby gained deep respect for
those of other theological persuasions. "We have discovered very genuine brothers and sisters
in other groups, with whom it is rewarding to cooperate. We don't want to lose them." Yet,
closer to home, the departure of the Plymouth Brethren and Pentecostals from the common
church federation with the Baptists appears imminent. Political borders are being superseded
by theological ones. Reinhard Assmann is encouraged by a new openness for matters of social
conscience and political responsibility within Baptist circles in recent years and is hoping to
form a committee with the goal of protecting those concerns within a new, united church.
Assmann cites East German scientists who noted in 1988 that the East German living
standard would, if spread over the entire globe, require the resources of two earth-sized
planets. The same report listed the U.S. as requiring 5.5 worlds. He and his cohorts are
distressed that the thrust of the East German masses towards West German prosperity would
appear to be a movement away from the Third World.
EAST GERMANY'S PACIFIST DEFENSE MINISTER

The scene at national military headquarters in Strausberg outside of East Berlin on April 18 was hardly routine: East Germany's top military brass was assembled to witness the inauguration of East Germany's best-known pacifist and "peacenik" as defense minister. During those festivities held without military ceremony, Rev. Rainer Eppelmann expressed his conviction that love of neighbor includes loving the enemy." In a setting shortly thereafter, he redefined military strength as "the capability to refrain from shooting."

Undoubtedly, West Germany's Der Spiegel exaggerated only slightly when it concluded that Rev. Eppelmann was surely the most unlikely boss of an army "since the invention of gunpowder."

In the mid-1960s, Eppelmann had spent eight months in prison for refusing to take the oath reserved for non-combatant construction soldiers." After becoming pastor of East Berlin's Church of the Samaritan" in 1974, this congregation evolved into a hotbed of dissident political activity. He was the most prominent speaker of the church-allied "Swords to Plowshares" movement in the early 1980s. A year ago, Rainer Eppelmann was reputed to be East Germany's most spied-upon pastor. Electronic bugs had been found in a lamp and electrical outlets located in his office. How thoroughly Eppelmann had been scrutinized only became evident in February when it was revealed that the Lutheran lawyer and activist Wolfgang Schnur, a confidant of Eppelmann, had been reporting to the secret police for 25 years.

As cabinet member, the 47-year-old United pastor is now lofting grand plans for disarmament; indeed, his official title is "Minister for Disarmament and Defense." He aspires to making his country a "world champion in disarming" and intends to cut military expenditures by as much as 50 percent. The GDR "People's Army" numbered 170,000 soldiers last year; he is hoping to reduce their number by 70-100,000. Yet Eppelmann's new duties demand an intricate balancing act. Military morale has nose-dived and desertions are commonplace. For the sake of job and military security, he is now expected to combine short-term stabilization of the army with long-term efforts to achieve its disbandment. In early May, Eppelmann fired three officers who had written a letter to the West German defense minister suggesting the dissolution of their army and the stationing of the West German forces on East German soil. He defends the retention of a draft with the excuse that an all-volunteer army can easily lead to a state within a state. Disarming is also expensive, he noted in his inauguration speech: The scrapping of a tank costs $21-27,000. Publicly, the GDR officer corps accepts its dramatic defeat with grace. Yet behind the scenes, the situation is undoubtedly turbulent. The Red Army has reduced East German access to Soviet military secrets; some border duties delegated to East German soldiers decades ago have
returned to Soviet hands. "We will remain loyal to our former pact partners" is among Eppelmann's craftiest statements, for his "People's Army" is officially still very much a member of the Warsaw Pact. Eppelmann, who has taken over the leadership of the "Democratic Outbreak" party from the disgraced Wolfgang Schnur, remains a rather unlikely conservative. Several of his proposals do not agree with the official policies of his own ruling conservative coalition. On a recent flight to Moscow, he suggested to reporters that a reunited German army join both military pacts, a Soviet proposal long since rejected by the adherents of NATO. His assurance that the People's Army will remain in existence as long as Europe retains two pact systems also did not match Western policy.

The church continues to have its problems with the controversial pastor. The "replacement of Karl Marx with Martin Luther" has caused little jubilation in those church circles which believe the church must remain in opposition to the state. They harbor fears that their church will now lose its 40-year-old reverence for worldly powers. Consequently, they are attacking Eppelmann's sudden transformation from dissident to state minister.

The bearded peace activist contends that he will strive for a democratization of the army, "But I cannot imagine, that a battalion will simply tell its commander, 'Sorry, we don't feel like doing anything today.'" He defends the retention of a draft with the excuse that an all-volunteer army can easily lead to a state within a state. The number of conscientious objectors doing alternative service has increased from several thousand to 53,000 this year. Eppelmann intends, officially for reasons of fairness, to guarantee that they no longer receive more pay than soldiers. Disarming is also expensive, he noted in his inauguration speech: The scrapping of a tank costs $21-27,000.

Whether he will be able to refute applause from NATO-hardliners, committed almost strictly to disarming the other side, remains to be seen.

THE FEARS OF THE EAST GERMAN CHURCH AT ELECTION TIME

The initial stage of jubilation has passed and East German Protestants are now facing the hard task of rethinking their role and task within society. While West Germans have fewer mixed feelings and feel their world view confirmed by the course of events, many East German Christians find their sense of self-worth in shambles. Consequently, Western Christians are frequently offended when their Eastern compatriots cannot accept the ready embrace being offered them. At the East German federation's synod in late February, physicist Udo Semper described his own emotional state: "Having reached the other shore 28 years after the building of the Wall, I now feel like a shipwrecked person waiting to be pounced upon by the pirates."
Indeed, the East's Protestant church leadership is unwilling to accept reunification as a simple enlargement of the existing West German state. The Berlin Declaration, issued on February 9, rejects the West as the "normal," acceptable social model for the future. East Berlin's Bishop Gottfried Forck stressed once again at the opening of the all-Berlin synod on March 16 that the unification and economic restoration of Germany may not occur at the expense of the Third World. Due to its supposed inability to address the crying needs of the Third World, the Erfurt Provost Heino Falcke demands a "radical perestroika for capitalism."

The church journalist Stefan Berg cites the capitalist countries own internal ills: "The West is not the promised land. They also have an emigration problem there: via drugs to another planet."

Yet East Germans are hardly optimistic about their chances to reform the West: Udo Semper claimed at the all-Berlin synod that Easterner's greatest present loss is "the loss of the dream of a socially-just society, the lack of which continues to be felt worldwide."

Bishop Forck has also expressed the fear that the past, uncompromising clarity in the relationship between church and state could become a victim of church unification. East German churches have possessed no military officers and precious few management executives. Consequently, they have felt less pressured to accommodate the powerful within military and finance. Only West German Protestants have taken a stance clearly in favor of atomic deterrence; Forck claims that an East German church statement preferring pacifism could most likely not have been issued in the West.

In addition, Easterners are wary of Western pressure to reinstitute religious instruction in schools. It was stated at the all-Berlin synod that its Eastern members had long fought for schools free of ideological rigidity. Consequently, they cannot now replace the atheistic bias with a Christian one.

Reform-minded Eastern leaders have long harbored visions of a church supported entirely by the voluntary donations of its members. Yet Heino Falcke himself admitted at the Federation's synod that such hopes have been dashed. While rejecting mandatory church taxes, East German churches have remained major recipients of Western church taxes collected by the state. Indeed, in some instances 50% of their budget was covered by subsidies from the West. Now, the West German EKD is demanding that the East institute mandatory church taxes for all church members, and that they be collected by the state.

East German pastors have earned one-fourth as much as their Western colleagues. Eastern church leaders attribute much of their credibility to the fact that the clergy have survived on earnings lower than the national average. But it is difficult to imagine that Western clergy will now accept salary reductions as part of the attempt to create a common pay scale with the East.
On January 17 in Loccum, the EKD and Federation had proclaimed rapid unification "irrespective of future political developments." The Federation's outgoing bishop, Werner Leich, was later severely criticized for this initiative at the Federation's synod. The all-Berlin synod on the eve of national elections expressed a kind of compromise: unification will surely occur, but only at a pace not too rapid for emotional digestion in the East.

Yet the national elections of March 18, 1990 have proven that for the majority of East German voters, West Germany indeed is an appropriate and welcome model. Though two of the three parties within the victorious conservative Alliance are headed by Lutheran pastors (the third, the CDU's Lothar de Maiziere, is an active layman), they hardly represent the opinions of the church's leadership. Election results have once again placed the church's "think tanks" in the role of a dissident minority within society. Recent East German history has shown though that such a stance is not without merit.

HONECKER FINDS REFUGE WITH A PROTESTANT PASTOR

The beleaguered former East German communist party leader and head of state, Erich Honecker, has been residing in the home of a Protestant pastor in Lobetal, northeast of Berlin, since January 30, 1990.

Pastor Uwe Holmer's residence is located on the grounds of the Hoffnungstaler Anstalten, a renowned facility for the elderly and mentally disabled. Honecker was not offered a place in the rest home in order to placate those who might accuse the church of placing him at the top of a long waiting list of elderly, ill persons. Though the former leader remains in failing health, his trial for treason was scheduled to begin later.

Honecker's wife, Margot, who spent nearly three decades as minister of education, resides with him. Giving refuge to the Honeckers has incited a storm of protests in both Christian and secular circles. It is even claimed that one Lutheran congregation has removed itself from denominational membership in protest. East Germany's ruling bishop, Werner Leich noted recently that the church is now experiencing what Christ did: the abrupt change in mood from "Hosannah" to "Crucify him!" East Berlin bishop Gottfried Forck stresses that the church cannot only proclaim forgiveness, it must also be demonstrated when a concrete opportunity presents itself. Forck adds that many of those protesting loudest should rather be smiting their breasts. "It disturbs me that people who should be meditating on their own past...are instead looking for a scapegoat in order to wash themselves clean."

It was recently revealed that the Honeckers had been offered living quarters in state-owned housing. Yet jittery party authorities, and the Honeckers themselves, felt that the couple would be best protected from irate or inquisitive citizens by placing them in a remote setting located on church property.
The initial euphoria regarding the Loccum statement from January 17 on church reunification is being replaced by uneasiness in the East. East Germany's primary Protestant weekly, Die Kirche, labels the Loccum paper an attempted putsch and points out that synods, not bishops, have a mandate to decide questions of such major significance. Not a few East German church leaders fear that the hard-won respect which their church has earned in the international realm would be lost if the eastern church were simply to rejoin the western one. Detractors point out, that it was not the East German state, but rather the West German church's increasing closeness to its government in the late 1950s, which had made the continued organizational unity of the East and West German churches impossible. Many East German pastors have neither forgotten nor forgiven the West German EKD for having instituted a pact with the state regarding military chaplains for the Bundeswehr in 1957.

Horsta Krum, a Reformed pastor in West Berlin, claims that differences in church salaries, church-state relations, and religious instruction in schools had made the organizational unity of the church impossible by 1959, two years before the erection of the Wall. "Until thought is given to these matters and a common route is found, there cannot be any all-German or all-Berlin church." Will the Western church demand that church taxes in the East again be collected by the state's internal revenue system? A significant number of church leaders in the East fear that their progression towards a voluntary and self-supporting church independent of the state will be destroyed by a hasty church reunification on Western terms.

East Germany is presently very much in the throes of an increasingly heated election campaign; dozens of Protestant pastors have accepted party or political office. The campaign is increasingly coming under the control of West Germany's leading parties (the Christian Democrats, Social Democrats, Liberals). These three parties have chosen to ignore a decision by East Germany's roundtable "parliament" to forbid campaign speeches by West German politicians in the East. Such practices cause consternation within independent-minded church circles in the East.

The roundtable continued to meet every week; its sessions are chaired by a Lutheran, Catholic, or Methodist clergyman. Free elections, the first in 44 years, took place on March 18; the first all-Berlin synod since 1961 took place the same weekend.