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## WILL THE FACE OF THE GERMAN CHURCH CHANGE?

by Bill Yoder

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Volker Rhe, General-Secretary of West Germany's Christian-Democratic party (CDU), reflected conventional wisdom last Summer when he predicted that his party and government would become more northern, eastern and Protestant. The old West German state had long been reputed to be a Catholic entity. Indeed, in 1949 the outspoken Church President Martin Niemoeller had made the irreverent claim that the West German state was "conceived in the Vatican and born in Washington." Chancellor Konrad Adenauer's preference for a divided German state was said to be rooted in the belief that the Protestant East was heavily Social Democratic (SPD), and that the CDU would be winning fewer elections in an all-German state.

But times have changed. Thanks to unification, there are again slightly more Protestants than Catholics in the Federal Republic. Nevertheless, the year of German reunification brought no resounding victories for Social Democrats. During provincial elections in October 1990, 55% of all East German Protestants voted for the CDU and only 22% for the SPD. The East German provinces don't even appear particularly evangelical. Though less than 10% of the population is Catholic, four of five provincial Minister-Presidents are. Past Protestant claims regarding church numbers on Martin Luther's home turf now appear overblown. In 1989, East Germany's Federation had claimed to have 5.1 million members; more recent estimates range from two to three million.

These are not the only negative surprises confronting East German Lutherans. The multiple waves of anarchy, neo-fascism, racism, and aggressive consumption have them reeling. An East German church paper, *Der Weg*, noted that people were no longer buying Bibles, but rather "used cars and pornography." Until 1989, the St. Andreas - St. Markus church in East Berlin had been brimming with activists fighting for progress on political and ecological issues. Rev. Hans-Peter Schneider reports that attendance in this church is now

down to 40 or 50; elsewhere in East Berlin, as few as five or six worshipers may appear on Sundays. Journalist Marianne Usko calls this a "status quo negative." Things are again as they were years ago in the church, only worse.

Much to the glee of conservatives, election results have shown white-collar church activists that the East German masses do not believe as they do. Many therefore agree with the novelist Christoph Hein's despondent conclusion: "We have been living in a land we are only now getting to know."

## CHANGES SOLELY IN THE EAST

Politician and former church administrator Manfred Stolpe's prophecy that both West and East would be invading each other's territory is the expression of an ideal, not reality. Legally, a reunification did not occur in Germany; rather, the Eastern state joined the Western one. This 'joining-up' was echoed in the church realm; one could claim that 90% of the changes being made by the church at large will be felt only in the East.

For one, the East German church is losing its once-cherished independence from the state. A secret CDU paper discusses a strategy for building party support within the church. East German church leaders were lambasted by Western church and state officials for refusing to have church bells rung on October 3 during unification celebrations. Western journalists accused ruling East German Bishop Christoph Demke of "damaging the reputation of the church" by refusing to participate in a church-state worship service on October 3. Indeed, Demke's decision to spend the day in the Soviet capital was described as "an escape to Moscow." Undoubtedly, the arrival of Christian military officers and bankers will temper the radical, past East German positions on peace and economics. Religious instruction is beginning in public schools along West German patterns. This is one further indication of the increasing meshing between church and state institutions.

The secret already-mentioned CDU memorandum criticizes the East Germans as "ecumenical super students" and hints that it will be attempting to limit the political objectives of the ecumenical movement. With the CDU as an adversary, the ecumenical "Council for Justice, Peace and the Preservation of the Environment," has fallen upon hard times. Two years ago, it had served as an ersatz parliament in the former East German state.

Secondly, Eastern church leaders such as Erfurt's Heino Falcke have encouraged the movement towards a more voluntary church. For them, the return on January 1 of non-voluntary church taxes collected by the state will be a major step backward. The announcement of the imposition of this tax in October led to an exodus from both Lutheran and Catholic churches. In East Berlin alone, 70,000 persons had their names removed from church rolls within a month. Of course, newspaper photos of hundreds waiting at

courthouses to have their requests processed has done little to foster church self-confidence.

## POSSIBLE CHANGES IN THE WEST

Possible all-German changes born in the East may be limited to two. In both instances, massive support from Westerners is aiding the chances of their acceptance in all of Germany. The first one is of interest not only to church circles: abortion. The East has demanded all-German acceptance of its more liberal abortion policies, a demand understandably hailed by Western feminists. Consequently, abortion-on-demand within a certain time-frame is still permitted in the five new German provinces. A paper from the East German church federation in September refused to demand a change, maintaining that legal steps against abortion are ineffective. It did concede that abortions "are in most cases an act contrary to the will of God." A conservative pro-life lobby, KALEB, retorted angrily: "The killing of bishops is in most cases an act contrary to the will of God."

The other matter, military chaplainships, sports an equally troubled history. Instituted through an agreement between Chancellor Adenauer and the officially all-German church in 1957, it has long been regarded as quiet proof of West German Lutheranism's willingness to ally itself with Western power structures at the expense of the East German church. According to Easterners, this statute dilutes the church's independence.

Though the East German Federation has stated repeatedly that it will not accept the chaplainship statute in its present form, Western chaplains have accompanied Bundeswehr soldiers to their new outposts in Eastern Germany. Indeed, Bundeswehr officers made it a point to visit local parsonages and request pastoral support for their soldiers. East Berlin's Provost Hans-Otto Furian responded by warning his pastors to refrain from holding any sermons in conjunction with military ceremonies. "Military ceremonies preach louder than even the best sermon," he insisted.

The Federation does not reject the counseling of soldiers as such but insists instead that the chaplainship program be removed from the Department of Defense and be made the sole responsibility of the church. Chaplains should no longer be civil servants but remain church employees. The provincial churches of Hesse and Bremen have responded favorably to Eastern suggestions. With considerable good fortune, Heino Falcke may never be forced to carry out his threat to renounce church membership if the Western chaplainship statute is ever instated in the East.