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THE CHURCHES IN THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC:
NOTES OF AN INTERESTED OBSERVER

by Nancy Lukens

Dr. Nancy Lukens is Associate Professor of German at the College of Wooster (OH) and an ordained elder of the United Presbyterian Church, USA. She studied at the Free University of Berlin in 1966-67, and completed her Ph. D. in German studies at the University of Chicago in 1973. In 1980-81, she was in West Berlin on a fellowship of the Humboldt Foundation (Bonn) to write a book based on letters and papers of Adam von Trott, a younger member of the July 20, 1944, anti-Nazi conspiracy. She has pursued an interest in the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany and in the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer—leading adult education forums on these and holocaust-related themes. This essay is revised from the June, 1980, issue of Kirche in Sozialismus (W. Berlin), and from Studies in GDR Culture and Society, ed. Margy Gerber (University Press of America, 1981)—the proceedings of the 1980 GDR Symposium; it is published with the permission of both.

The first dilemma involving the churches in the GDR, in the gathering of impressions about the self-image of any institution, is the question of whom to ask. What individuals or groups speak for "the Church" or "the churches" in the GDR? In the case of the Protestant churches, for example, the perspectives and facts emphasized might vary greatly, depending on whether one asked the official leadership of the Federation of Protestant Churches (Bund der Evangelischen Kirchen) with its international and ecumenical concerns and connections, on the one hand, or any of the 50,000 some participants in the 1978 Leipzig Church Fair (Kirchentag), 44% of whom were under thirty. Just as representative, but with an entirely different scope of reference, might be church employees engaged in managing the vast network of homes for the aged and handicapped or other social service facilities, including kindergartens and a number of private educational institutions with the logical focus.

The diversity of perceptions and opinions about what "the Church" in the GDR has been during the thirty years since 1949 and what it is today would be reflected as well if one gathered self-descriptive statements by the eight member-churches of the Protestant Federation mentioned above (three Lutheran, five United), by the ten independent churches not part of the Federation (Freikirchen), or by the ten recognized religious groups and sects. The independent churches include Methodists, Baptists, Herrnhut Brethren, Mennonites, Quakers, and smaller groups such as Neo-Apostolics, Seventh-Day Adventists, Mormons, and half a dozen others.

Then again, there is the question whether one asks theological educators and students--there are Protestant theological faculties or "sections" at major univer-
sities and three theological seminaries in the GDR—or whether one goes to the grass­roots to see how folks in house-church circles or in the worshipping congregations view themselves and their institutions. Among pastors, one might get different views, depending on whether they were men or women, whether they serve several rural par­ishes or a large city one or are hospital chaplains.

Diversity, then, is just as great in the GDR as in any very advanced techno­logical society. However, I see a major difference between the self-perception of Christians and churches in the GDR and that found in the West. This difference is that on the whole the Christians mentioned in the above categories would identify with a certain positive self-consciousness as belonging to a Kirche im Sozialismus. Of course there is a wide range of interpretations as to what that means politically. It certainly does not connote total agreement between Marxism and Christianity or with the totality of present-day GDR socialism. But I have repeatedly been struck by a certain parallel between statements made by non-Christian socialists and church members in the GDR about their conscious decision to come to the GDR after the war, or to stay when many were leaving for "greener pastures" prior to the construction of the Wall in August, 1961. Even after the freedom of geographical choice was taken away, the theological basis for Christians in the GDR to affirm living and working within socialism seems to be simply their sense of being called to live God's pres­ence in that place.

Before summarizing aspects of the churches' self-image gathered from most of these diverse areas of church life and adding personal observations, I would like to make two points which serve to indicate my biases. First, the Church consists of people, of personalities in relationship with God, with each other, and with the world in which they try to live out their faith. Any statements of church doctrine or institutional policy, any analysis of church-state functions, in the GDR or else­where, should be understood against the background of this brightly colored fabric—which we regrettably cannot know well from a distance. Second, what we can know better from a distance—but usually do not make the effort to find out—is how the GDR churches, as well as individual theologians and laypersons, represent themselves in print. Periodicals such as Zeichen der Zeit, an independent Protestant monthly published for church workers, or Standpunkt, a politically oriented Protestant monthly published in the Union Verlag, present a wide spectrum of issues and theological reflections as well as practical realities of church life. In all there are thirty­one theological and church periodicals in the GDR, out of 519 periodicals. The two Protestant publishing houses, Union Verlag and Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, and the Roman Catholic St. Benno Verlag together produced 338 titles in 1978, with a combined total of 45.4 million copies; total GDR book production was 5906 titles.
This is by no means to suggest that the churches' self-understanding can only be expressed in specifically Christian contexts, but simply that there are available sources of literature which can be obtained from within the GDR. Conversely, there is no need for well-meaning Christians to send Bibles to the GDR; Christian bookstores there, in contrast with those in some other East European countries, are amply supplied with all commonly used translations. I offer these two comments in admittedly defensive response to the frequent query, "Oh, is there a church in the GDR? Isn't that a communist country?" There is, and it is not an underground church, but one recognized by the state--of course with mutual open admissions of differences in worldview. The Church has constitutional rights as the largest private corporation in the GDR, and as such has its own statutes, owns property, runs its own degree-granting institutions, and organizes public events.

I will summarize, in two major areas, statement made by church people during and following the 1979 anniversary year on issues which both inform and reflect their ongoing process of self-definition.

The Challenge of Being a Minority Church

In a synod address about the mission and course of the Protestant church over its thirty years of GDR existence, Berlin-Brandenburg Bishop Albrecht Schöngherr showed his awareness of both the pitfalls of institutions with power, and the opportunity inherent in being an institution free of the ballast of power which has historically plagued the Volkskirche (national church) in Germany. In a society where church membership, baptism and confirmation, Christian marriage and burial are by no means rituals to be taken for granted any more as they are in many Western countries, they can once again be conscious steps taken out of faith in the power of the gospel in a secularized world. Schöngherr points out, showing his debt to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's concept of "religionless Christianity": "A minority church can achieve distance more easily than a majority church can from the occidental mixture of Christian faith and cult of mammon. Perhaps a minority church can help bring the Sermon on the Mount more into view as Jesus' great help to make this world whole."6

Of course, the challenge comes with working out the practical forms of support community and pastoral care without the relatively immense fiscal elbow room enjoyed by the Volkskirche in the Federal Republic of Germany, current budget cuts notwithstanding. The financing of existing or previously common structures can no longer be assumed, nor does it seem appropriate in many instances. The declining membership in traditional parishes certainly offers the GDR churches the challenge to develop new forms of church life as well as governance structures which lead away from employee-centered and pastor-centered models of the past. It is not insignificant, perhaps,
that frequent reference is made in church contexts to the positive experience of
the church—the *ecclesia* in the broadest sense—at the grassroots level in Latin
America.7

Schönherr undoubtedly speaks for many others in the GDR church scene when he
affirms the challenge presented by being a church without majority privilege. In an
earlier address to theology students at the East Berlin *Sprachenkonvikt*, he notes
that it is precisely in this situation that Christians can learn to live out what
Dietrich Bonhoeffer meant by "Christianity in a world come of age." He warns them,
however, against seeing the "religionlessness" of our times as the result of atheist
propaganda, but instead as a stage in humanity's way of relating to God, which needs
to be reborn constantly in the real contexts of life.8 Methodist lay preacher Carl
Ordnung agrees with Schönherr's premise that the theology of the cross, of powerless­
ness, and of life for others opens revolutionary doors for GDR Christians within
socialism, but his evaluation of the past thirty years' progress in this direction
falls on the negative side. Ordnung sees in the GDR church a tendency to react de­
fensively to changes such as those brought about by the advent of socialism, rather
than anticipating them and speaking to them out of the perspective of the gospel.
Recent openness to seeing the proximity of socialist thought and the Christian gos­
pel, he points out, has come not from within the GDR churches, but from their nec­
essary encounter with Latin American liberation movements.9

On the other hand, it is not hard to understand that the realities of GDR soc­
ialism do present the churches with a challenge, given the fact that their leader­
ship traditionally comes from the educated upper classes in a society oriented to­
ward the rule of the workers and peasants. It is hard to let go of tradition and
privilege. I have also heard many individuals—from students in a private church
high school to lay adults in a weekend workshop situation—express the tensions that
arise in everyday situations in which they in fact find their opportunities to serve
constructively limited because of their participation in church programs or the fact
that their educational degree is from a Christian institution.

The "Social Space" of the GDR Churches

There has been much discussion, and slow but significant changes have taken place
in the everyday circumstances of the churches' life and work, since the landmark dia­
logue of March 6, 1978, between Erich Honecker and the Executive Council of the Pro­
estant Federation. Chairman Honecker lauded the churches on this occasion for their
consistent work toward ending the arms race, whether by international ecumenical dis­
cussion or adult education at home. He underscored the state's respect and support
for the diaconic work of the churches, i. e., their social and medical care facili­
ties, which provide, for example, about 85% of the GDR's services for the handicapped. He assured the church representatives that the constitutional rights to security, protection, higher education, vocational training and development guaranteed to each GDR citizen regardless of age, sex, worldview, or religious conviction are secure in practice to Christians. Bishop Schönherr, speaking for the Federation delegation, replied with a number of specific requests for improvements in this line, which were then worked out in discussion and summarized in the joint press communique published in the media in East and West.

One area Schönherr emphasized was the need for space, both materially and in ideas, in which the church communities can work, worship, and carry on their educational programs. Since then, the "social space" for worship and church public relations includes increased radio broadcast time, and, for the first time, major slots in GDR TV's second channel for documentary programs or televised worship services. Permission was granted to hold worship in prisons as well as to increase counseling personnel and religious library facilities there. Approval was given for tenured church employees to join the state pension program and for expansion of the import from the West of literature needed for the churches' ecumenical work. Quite apart from the March 6th agreements, there is also a program of church building construction in many new housing developments.

In summary, Schönherr noted in the March 6th statement that the situation of Christians throughout the GDR could be measured by that of individuals in their particular location and circumstances. Since then, changes have been implemented, and instances of apparent discrimination against church members have been brought in good faith to the appropriate channels for action. The fact that the church is taken seriously by the state is underscored in another context when Bishop Schönherr notes, in the April, 1979, synod address cited above, the state's reaction to critical questions from the churches on the subject of military instruction in the public schools. More recently, there has been much speculation about the effects of the increasing East-West tensions on church-state relations in the GDR. Following the Polish crisis in the late summer of 1980, and the November, 1980, measures which drastically curtailed numbers of Western visitors by increasing the minimum currency exchange to twenty-five West Marks per diem, the Protestant Federation did, in fact, experience unambiguous restrictions, such as the exclusion of Western correspondents from regional synods meeting soon thereafter. Whereas in early 1980 the close cooperation between the GDR Protestant Federation and the West German Protestant Church in peace issues had been welcomed, and contacts between GDR church representatives and West German politicians were acceptable as part of an open relationship to Bonn, there was a clear
change in party policy in these matters by fall. 12

Nevertheless, the ideological basis of GDR policy toward the churches remains the conviction that Christian citizens can best be encouraged to move more and more in the direction of socialism by allowing them to assert themselves in their own terms, and by maintaining "a constructive, cooperative relationship between state and church institutions characterized by mutual respect for their differing viewpoints"—the formulation used by State Secretary for Church Affairs Klaus Gysi, as quoted in a report to the synod on the balance of church-state relations since March 6, 1978. An example of the delicate balance of this constructive cooperation is the continuing preparation by both a church and a state committee for the 1983 Luther anniversary year. In many other areas, standing agreements and negotiations have not been adversely affected by the tensions mentioned, nor has the situation of individual Christians become noticeably worse.

Aside from the provisions specified in the March 6th church-state dialogue, other aspects of the "social space" of the GDR churches should be mentioned. They include an extensive network of adult education programs, such as those of the "Evangelische Akademie." Recent weekend conference topics in the Berlin academy have included, for example: technology and the environment; the legacy of Bonhoeffer in the socialist and third-world countries today; lyric poetry today; historic preservation of music—Bach interpretation today; feminism in the church, and Christian language and the Tower of Bable—a seminar featuring writer Franz Fühmann, who is a professing Marxist. The church in general also provides a forum for public appearances of artists and writers on a scale incomparable to that of churches in the West.

Another area of extensive activity of the GDR churches—-one which reaches beyond the official membership—-is that of youth work. Although only about 3-4% of the thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds are choosing the route of church confirmation at present, 13 many more of the youth participate in programs offered by the churches, from weekend retreats and excursions to local Bible study and discussion groups and social activities. It is my impression that the churches provide a "safe" forum in which young people can openly hash out their questions and form a basis for life decisions. A 45-minute television documentary filmed in Potsdam and broadcast on GDR-TV on May 15, 1979, showed an unrehearsed discussion of a confirmation class in which the issue of Jugendweihe (the secular socialist youth initiation ceremony) versus Christian confirmation provoked thoughtful responses by all involved. 14 Some saw no contradiction of loyalties between affirming faith in God and pledging to be a responsible member of socialist society. Others struggled with the tension they felt between the two levels and forms of loyalty asked of them.
Last but not least, the GDR churches' social space includes a network of ecumenical contacts and activities both domestically and abroad. Of particular interest to Americans, perhaps, is the existence since 1977 of a fulltime position for an American Liaison Officer sent by the National Council of the Churches of Christ, to work with the Federation of Protestant Churches in the GDR on both official and local parish levels. The current representative, the Rev. Barbara Green, lives in West Berlin and commutes regularly to both East Berlin and each of the eight regional churches in the Bund. Delegations have been sent both ways several times between the USA and the GDR, with discussion focusing, for example, on the mutual concern for disarmament and peace. The GDR churches have constituent membership in the Geneva-based World Council of Churches, the Conference of European Churches, and an active regional committee of the international Christian Peace Conference. In third-world circles, a number of churches in countries which have recently become socialist, such as Vietnam and Ethiopia, have entered into ecumenical dialogue with the GDR churches in hope of learning something from their longer history as churches in a socialist society. Since the Helsinki accords of 1975, there has been increasing participation by GDR churches in human rights concerns, as reflected by the recent publication by the Federation of Protestant Churches entitled Menschenrechte in christlicher Verantwortung (Human Rights and Christian Responsibility).

Concluding Impressions

Finally, I would like to add personal observations to two aspects of life in the GDR that are not specific to the churches but represent open questions in GDR society which naturally affect the life of the church community as well. First, the issue of Vergangenheitsbewältigung (coming to terms with the past, e. e., of Nazi Germany): It strikes me as a significant factor in the early history of GDR church-state relations that the respective leaders in church and state, Christians and Communists, had in many cases already discovered each other as allies in the anti-fascist struggle of the early-to-mid-1930's. The forced togetherness continued through 1945, in many cases within the concentration camps. Thus, there was a personal basis for trust and cooperation between church and government officials in building socialist society in the GDR.

Further, I mention random signs that there is considerable concern to deal with the realities of the Nazi past in both church and state:

1. The state has financed the renovation of the major Berlin synagogue--destroyed in the November, 1938, pogrom--as a historical monument. There were numerous events in November, 1978, commemorating the fortieth anniversary of this Kristallnacht.
2. The Protestant-sponsored organization, AktiOn Sühnezeichen (Action for Reconciliation), founded in 1958, and functioning separately since the Wall, organizes service projects for young adults. At one time GDR youth were involved in construction of a memorial at the Theresienstadt concentration camp site, together with Czech and Hungarian young people. Today, such projects are carried out only among GDR youth. At annual Sühnezeichen/GDR meetings, peace issues and the processing of the history of Nazism are a major focus.

3. A March, 1981, conference of the Evangelische Akademie, entitled "Kreuz und Hakenkreuz--Christen im Dritten Reich" (Cross and Swastika--Christians in the Third Reich), featured an historical overview, interviews with four surviving Confessing Church pastors, a theologian's discussion of the contradiction between nationalist folk religion and the theology of the cross, and an open discussion about present implications of past mistakes. Participants ranged from age fifteen to witnesses of the Nazi period who are now in their eighties, including workers, teachers, church employees, a lawyer, and students. As in America and elsewhere since the showing of the "Holocaust" film, more and more Christians are being confronted with the continuing existential dilemma presented by Auschwitz and all that has come to be associated with that name. More and more the awareness has moved beyond the necessary question of war criminals and the "compensation" to victims of the Holocaust, and into the ever-present question of what it means concretely to be a Christian after Auschwitz.

Another open question remains that of the legal and illegal emigration of citizens from the GDR, and the related complex of attitudes concerning Freizügigkeit—the freedom to move and travel. The very fact that church members and delegations have been among those granted visas to attend meetings in Western countries naturally creates a barrier of envy, or at least of knowledge, toward those less privileged. I sense that it is among the older generations who have known other places and among the well-travelled set of younger church leaders that the conviction is strongest that they would never choose to live in the West. But I have been aware in many instances of some difficulty in helping the younger generations find their own identity as Christians in the socialist context without the opportunity to compare notes freely and to define themselves culturally and theologically without concrete experience of their Western counterparts. In situations in which people seeking exit visas are discriminated against on the job and turn to the church for help, there is a certain buffer space in which the church can offer meaningful employment for some, but it certainly cannot prevent others from choosing to leave rather than to stay. As the international situation continues to increase East-West tensions, it remains to be seen how the churches will deal with the problems which arise.
In summary, the GDR churches reflect the diversity of their structures and their membership on all levels of their involvement in local, regional, national, and international work, and they continue in an ongoing process of dealing with unanswered questions. Lest it be overlooked, I hasten to emphasize that the churches are by no means only institutions of social service, of church-state dialogue, or of ecumenical cooperation, but primarily local bodies of Christians worshipping and working through all the everyday struggles and moments of celebration which their unique situation generates. The prognosis for the next thirty years undoubtedly includes much uncertainty and depends not only on how the churches understand themselves in the GDR, but also on how willing we all are to go out of our way to understand the delicate balance of world peace.

Footnotes

2 For further breakdowns and membership statistics, see Hans-Jürgen Rüder, "Churches and Religious Groups in the GDR. An Overview with Figures," in Kirche im Sozialismus, special English issue, June, 1979, pp. 32-38. Rüder points out, e.g., that the Roman Catholic Church in the GDR, despite its location in an area which has historically been predominantly Lutheran, and despite the general tendency of churches to lose membership with increasing secularization, showed a membership of almost 1,300,000 in 1974, and some 3800 nuns and priests working in parishes, counseling facilities, and retreat houses. On the Protestant side, the figures were about 8,000,000 in 1978, with about 4000 pastors and fifty-one diaconal (service) institutions.
3 For more differentiated discussion, see "Kirche in der ideologischen Diaspora," in Peter Fischer, Kirche und Christen in der DDR (Berlin/West: Gebr. Holzapfel, 1978), pp. 98 ff.
5 Ibid., p. 309.
6 "On the Mission and Course of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Socialist Society of the GDR," Kirche im Sozialismus, No. 4, 1979, special English issue, pp. 13-31, based on an April, 1979, address to the Synod of the Evangelische Kirche in Berlin-Brandenburg.
7 See note 9, below.
10 This and the following are paraphrased from the National Council of Churches (USA) version of the joint press release issued March 6, 1978, by GDR church and state parties to the dialogue. For complete texts, see the documentation of the Evangelischer Pressedienst (epd), "Texte aus der DDR," published by the Gemeinschaft der Evangelischen Publizistik, Frankfurt/M., West Germany.
11 "On the Mission," p. 28. Cf. also the state on this issue by Bishop Krusche of


13 According to the Kirchliches Jahrbuch, there were just over 5000 confirmations in the GDR in 1973, as compared to only 4243 in 1975.

14 The broadcast was entitled "Kirchen in der DDR." Cf. Kirche im Sozialismus, No. 3, 1979, Chronik, p. 6.


16 Conversation with Dr. Franz von Hammerstein, former General Secretary of "Aktion Sühnezeichen," West Berlin, March 8, 1981.